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CHALLENGES, NEEDS AND EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE PARENT STUDENT  
MOTHERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

---

A Dissertation  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership

---

by  
Gina Marie Vyskocil  
March 2018

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Approved by:

John Winslade, Committee Chair, Education  
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## ABSTRACT

While the literature addressing the experiences of women in higher education is expanding, the experiences of single mothers in academia remains under-explored, despite single student mothers being the largest and fastest growing student demographic in higher education institutions. The role of single mothers who are pursuing degrees while raising children assumes crucial importance in helping forge means of support that are not government-dependent, as well as enabling single parent student mothers to role model educational pursuits and achievement of degrees as possibilities for dependents. Though college degrees can provide means of financial stability and immense social and professional benefits for sole provider single-parent homes, higher education can prove significantly detrimental to the quality of parenting single parent students provide dependent children, and can negatively impact personal health, financial and economic security, and interpersonal relationships from undertaking multiplicity of roles.

This study seeks to understand the challenges, needs and experiences which occur at the intersection of parenthood and studenthood for single parent student mothers, as well as exploring ideologies of what it means to be a “good parent” or “good student.” It also inquires into student mothers’ perceptions of institutional support, which may impact matriculation or attrition and seeks to ascertain whether existing college policies need to be restructured to better support the degree-seeking endeavors of single parent student mothers.

Study findings revealed key themes that emerged from the data: participant awareness of constrained and competing time demands; competing pressures to produce the identities of “good mom” and “good student”; guilt arising from missed event choices; outcomes of forced choice events; guilt over lower classroom performance and loss of class standing over missed choice events; participants’ perspectives of in-class support by teachers or professors; participants’ views regarding presence or absence of institutional support tailored to their specific needs as single parent student mothers; participants’ concerns regarding student debt; and categories of unmet need and support services that would assist single mothers to degree completion. Student parents’ discursive narratives indicated internal and external pressure to perform better as students and parents.

Results revealed that nearly all respondents were forced on some occasions to choose between attendance at school and family events and being present at moments which would ensure optimal outcomes in both categories of competing identities. Conflict was experienced by respondents when student mothers were forced to shift into and out of various roles and identities which made it difficult for student parents to maximize performance in any central area of personal or professional achievement. Finally, student mothers’ discourses indicated they perceived others’ perceptions of their in-class performance, class standing, and professional trajectory of their achievement suffered when a forced choice situation resulted in their absence or tardy in a course, or inability to

participate in a group class activity. Student mothers revealed through their narratives instructors who shamed them in front of classmates for having to bring a child to class, or castigated them for bringing a child to an inappropriate forum in which content was not perceived as child-suitable. Student mother narratives revealed resentment regarding being exhorted to choose between being a parent and being a student, when, in their opinions, they were forced to undertake both roles concurrently, without sufficient support to engage in either role.

A key deficit identified in the narratives of student mothers was their perceived absence of institutional support which would enable them to achieve their educational goals and better provide for their families. Student parent narratives indicated struggles with concern about debt following graduation, and discourse revealed speculation regarding possible forced choices at some point in the future, if debt loads were too high to be supported by income, job insufficiency was experienced, or cost of living was too high to support both debt and living expenses.

(Keywords: single parent student, single mother, matriculation, higher education)



## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my amazing daughters, Samantha and Amanda, who have patiently accompanied me on this journey. They are already becoming the change in their world.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Problem Statement

Single parent student mothers are in a unique position while pursuing degrees in institutions of higher education and they face multiple challenges in attempts to pursue higher education. Access to graduate or post-graduate education may present insurmountable obstacles to parents who must fill both parenting roles, work full-time to provide for dependents while maintaining benefits to ensure their family's survival. Statistics for degree completion – skewed by the staggered nature or discontinuous manner in which degrees are ultimately achieved – indicate that 33.7 percent of low-income single women with children complete degrees within ten years (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010, p. 182). Another variable influencing both matriculation and attrition, in addition to delayed entry, is under-preparedness of single mothers, who also delay degree completion by having to enroll part time, enroll in basic or remedial education courses, further drawing out conferral (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010, p. 182). Weak academic preparation, parenting without a partner, and financial constraints all serve to make degree completion infeasible for some single mothers (p. 183).

## Purpose Statement

The aim of this dissertation is to explore, understand, and raise awareness of the lived experiences of single parent student mothers and the challenges they face in degree-completion endeavors at higher education degree-conferring institutions. The study examines the participants' educational experiences in order to understand their unique needs as parent students in the higher education institutional setting. This chapter will explain why this topic is important in reducing the feminization of poverty (Oksala, 2016; Pearce, 1978; Polakow, 1993) and in increasing the social and financial capital of single parent student mothers. It will address the role of institutional recognition and support of this unique and growing populace and how supporting their degree-seeking endeavors impacts the larger social good. It will also account for my interest in the topic and my personal history in relation to single parent student mothers.

## Selection of Research Topic and Positionality

I opened inquiry into this topic as a single parent student mother, and as a concerned and interested researcher seeking to elevate awareness of the challenges facing degree completion endeavors of a largely invisible and under-recognized student populace, of which private higher education institutions may be both unaware and unwilling to acknowledge. Experience has taught me that single parent student mothers face numerous obstacles which are not encountered by traditional student populaces, and that these challenges may



significantly impair odds of their success in degree-completion endeavors. In society, single parent student mothers may perceive themselves as invisible, and face stigma for parenting minor children without the presence of partners. Many also face the additional burden of being the family support 18-22 year old traditional college students possess, absent the increased burden of caregiving responsibilities for children and spouses. Education undertaken with the presence of minor children, particularly if those children are special needs or have medical conditions, causes roles as student, parent, breadwinner, care provider to become constrained, often undermining the success and academic efforts of single parent student mothers.

It is not unusual for researchers to have a personal interest in, or personal experience with their subject matter. By using my story in the introduction of this study, I hope to help shed light on why I am deeply interested in the outcome and impact of this research. Not only am I personally invested in improving the educational outcomes for single parent student mothers, I am intensely interested in improving their visibility in institutions of higher education and raising awareness of their plight as they enter into degree-seeking programs across the country.

There were many rich experiences which motivated me to pursue research into the lived educational experiences of single parent student mothers. I was motivated to study this population of students partly because I have shared and lived their same academic and personal experiences, and partly because I

have observed the negative educational, social, and political outcomes on adolescents whose mothers cannot succeed in procuring higher education degrees due to barriers they face in degree-seeking endeavors.

I see my personal history, including my experiences and struggles as a single parent student mother, as a lens,-- an interpretive framework,-- through which to examine the experiences of single parent student mothers in higher education endeavors. Through my philosophical and theoretical framework, I seek to bring to the forefront of institutional awareness, the plight of single parent student mothers who enroll into degree-conferring institutions across the country each year, seeking to throw off the trappings of feminine poverty and enrich the social, financial, and political capital of their children.

Additional burdens of attending classes and completing lengthy and time-constraining assignments as well as having to schedule and pay for child care during class time or group project assignments can tip the scale against degree completion for single parents already strained with caring for dependent children alone and assuming sole provider roles. In addition, factors at work in the feminization of poverty, for example, including views of the impoverished as lazy and unwilling to work, can present special challenges for those who have lost spouses due to death or abandonment, or have fled situations of spousal abuse (Tiamiyu & Mitchell, 2001). Laws have undergone historical changes in access to education and funding for single parent students, though lingering conflict remains concerning whether or not the social welfare system encourages

dependency. Questions of attribution contribute to whether or not a single mother is found “worthy” of assistance.

My experience as a single parent began when I filed for divorce from an abusive controlling spouse, who confiscated our financial resources as retribution for having the audacity to leave. Prolonged exposure to psychological and physical abuse resulted in serious health problems. My oldest daughter was diagnosed with autism and Type 1 diabetes and had costly medical needs. My youngest daughter was two years old. I was able to have my husband arrested for abuse. My husband threatened that our daughter would die if I did not get him released because she needed the insurance his job provided. I wrote letters petitioning the district attorney for his release.

I unleashed with that motion a chain of events that led to seven years of court battles, which drained my meager financial and emotional resources. I earned little as a college teacher and had been unsuccessful in procuring full-time benefited roles. I made the decision to return to school and pursue a doctorate. A terminal degree in my field, I was certain, would enable me to more successfully provide medically and financially for my two daughters. I assumed that copious amounts of financial aid would be available, and that additional forms of support and flexibility would be forthcoming from both educators and institutions. They were not.

Long nights caring for my daughter's medical needs, the cost of tuition and books, and time needed to meet rigorous course requirements splintered my ability to serve as provider, mother, father, and medical caregiver.

### Rationale for the Study

Single mothers are notably absent from literature on critical studies in higher education. I shall expand further on this subject in chapter two. A dearth in understanding of the obstacles single parent student mothers face in attempts to free themselves and their children from the trappings of poverty exists. The literature fails to address satisfactorily the situations, circumstances, challenges, and social/budgetary limitations that plague the educational journeys of single parent student mothers. This qualitative study allows for the voices of single parent student mothers to identify their most pressing needs for support in higher education attainment. Their perspectives in identifying need are unique because educators and researchers typically lack experience and insight into the private lives and struggles of single parent student mothers with dependent children. Through this exploratory and descriptive study, the single parent student mothers' voices can be raised in articulating and identifying where support could best be augmented to encourage degree completion.

## Significance of the Study

For single mothers, higher education is important in helping forge means of support that are not government dependent, as well as in enabling single parent student mothers to role model educational pursuits and achievement of degrees as possibilities for dependents. “Fragile families”--headed by parents who are unmarried (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010, p. 180), are in particular need of the benefits additional education can bestow on the financial stability of families. Institutional focus can support single mother success in higher education by locating educational achievement within the framework of the larger social good. Reduction of poverty, improved educational outcome and achievement of dependents, and better emotional well-being of successive generations are not insignificant benefits of supporting the educational endeavors of single parent student mothers.

Tehan (2007) argued single parent students are a special population who require different avenues of advisement than traditional. Stresses ordinarily present in an average college student’s academic experience can present extraordinary challenges for single parents. For example, having to schedule child care, care for sick or special needs children, meal planning and preparation, assisting with children’s homework, and taking children to doctor’s appointments, and prioritizing work/financial support with allocation of time for study in order to ensure academic success are just a few of the obstacles single mother students face weekly. Understanding such challenges and resources are important in

advising this student populace in order to stack the odds of success as greatly in their favour as possible (Tehan, 2007, p. 575). Gasman and Conrad (2015) noted that ensuring equal access to college is only half of the challenge of equal access to educational opportunity in a diverse society. Equal access –and thus, opportunity—means institutional grasp and valuation of the cultural, social, and educational resources unique students bring to college, including the underserved populace of single parent mothers who are students matriculating into higher education institutions. Single mother students may be underprepared in traditional ways, yet offer cultural and social capital (Coleman, 2006) which will serve them well in pursuit of advanced degrees, including work experience which can be lacking in the traditional student profile. Mainstream institutional models of academic experience are often indifferent to the cultural strands of experience such as those represented by single parent students who concurrently serve as head of household with dependent children.

### Challenges Facing Single Parent Student Mothers

Although college degrees can provide a means of financial stability and social and professional capital for sole providers in single parent homes, higher education can prove significantly detrimental (Bloom, 2009; Freeman, 2015) to the quality of parenting single parent students are able to provide for dependent children. As well, psychological strain from multiplicity of roles, or “role strain,”

can negatively impact personal health and other relationships, (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010, p. 180) for those single parents engaged in study.

While welfare and other government aid in the form of grants and scholarships has ostensibly made college access easier for single mothers, the gap between resources and reachability/knowledge of resource availability remains significant. Single mothers entering degree programs may seek means of financial augmentation but find few, if any, means of financial augmentation, because they fail to qualify for traditional forms of financial assistance, further undermining academic success for parents whose time is already divided between studies, work, and parenting. There is a lack of research today tracking one of the most significant yet under-recognized groups of students: single mothers, who are the sole source of support for dependents, while raising the next generation of Americans (Books, 2004). I will explore this deficit in chapter two.

### Study Aims

The purpose of this study is to identify and examine “multiply-disadvantaged” lone mothers (Lipman, 2010, p. 7), seeking degrees in higher education. The objective of this is to survey issues which may impact matriculation or attrition of single parent student mothers (Boutsen & Colbry, 1991) and whether existing college policies facilitate access, equity, and social justice for single parent mothers in higher education at Lakewood University, a

large comprehensive-based research university. The researcher was interested in raising the voices of single parent student mothers about their experiences in higher education degree-conferring programs into which they were enrolled in order to highlight challenges and needs during the intersectionality (Mann & Kelly, 1997) of their student/parent selves in educational attainment and to help educators and administrators understand potential avenues of support for this unique populace and the impact of such support on the greater social good (Chant, 2006).

### Research Questions

Consistent with qualitative research inquiry, the researcher sought to explore the needs of single parent student mothers studying in the higher educational institutional setting. The research questions which guided this inquiry were:

1. What needs are identified by single parent students in degree completion programs?
2. In what ways do student parents think advisors, teachers, administrators could reposition resources to better serve their needs?



Single parent student mothers will be defined as female, head of household, responsible for support and raising of dependent children under the age of eighteen while pursuing degrees in higher education. Males are excluded, because they do not traditionally face the same degree of discrimination in wages or hiring that females face. For single parent fathers, the issues are therefore, different. The study seeks to ascertain whether existing higher education structures and managerial/organizational practices lead to college attendance or present adverse consequences for families of unmarried parent students through institutional barriers.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

The orientation for this study relied on a variety of theories which contributed in varying ways to the development of an interpretive framework, or critical lens through which findings for the present study were viewed. Incorporated within the discussion of study results are tenets of social constructivist, feminist, and discourse analytic theories. All rely on experience as a valid form of knowledge. Knowledge stems from human experience (Collins, 2010), and, despite being embedded in networks of power, experience can be useful (Oksala, 2016). Feminist theory, according to Oksala, is of necessity phenomenological -- that is, it needs to address and build upon experience but also to take a transcendental perspective on that experience. Discursive practices—episodes that have social and cultural significance to a community of

speakers (Oksala, 2016)--shape human perception of identity and those identities are perceived in relation to worldview.

Discourse theory is utilized to understand the process of talk and interaction between people and the products of that interaction (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008). Discourse can additionally refer to a set of meanings, concepts, images, and/or statements that produce a particular representation of an event, object, person, or entity to other humans, relying on repetition to establish lexical patterning. In this context, written content of single parent student mothers' experiences obtained via survey administration serves as socio-literary examples of discourse. Discourse theory contains elements of influence from social constructionist and poststructuralist theory, or "social practice" (Foucault, 1972; Oksala, 2016), disseminated through cultural space that exerts dominant influence on speech and thought. In other words, discourse is a collectively established cultural idea (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008).

In this study, the researcher paid attention to various forms and types of discourses that shaped participants' experiences, as discourses, both dominant and resistant, shape human thought (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008). Social constructivism maintains that human development is socially situated and knowledge is collaboratively constructed through interaction with others (McKinley, 2015). Additionally, groups serve to construct knowledge for and within one another, creating a culture of shared meaning. When one is immersed within a culture, one is learning all the time about how to be a part of that culture

in varying forms and to differing degrees. Finally, social reproductive theory is invoked to support emphasis on the structures and activities that transmit social inequality from one generation to the next (Doob, 2013).

Qualitative inquiry utilizes inductive methods of data-gathering. In this study, survey questions were administered to a purposefully select target populace. Questions were designed to elicit detailed responses enabling the researcher to understand and identify key views of respondents about their needs in degree-seeking endeavors. This study focused on exploring and understanding the phenomenon of single parent studenthood in the higher educational setting and the implications of their experiences for academic success (Sen, 1999). The circumstances of single parent student mothers' lives, and the academic and institutional environment around them may be expected to contribute to their lived experiences as students and mothers, albeit in different ways.

The significance of education lies in its contributions to social outcomes (Books, 2004). In the broader contexts of justice and equity, educating single, unpartnered female student parents may shape their intellectual legacies, recognizing communities of parent student mothers and their contributions to collective knowledge and inquiry (Rendon, 2014). Changes in purpose and pedagogy can enable institutions to restructure the scope and purpose of higher education, to address community-based teaching, learning, and scholarship in a

way that embraces the highly diverse student population of today, including single mothers.

### Methodology

I selected survey as the method of qualitative inquiry to support my understanding of the single parent student experience. I sought to develop a portrait of a group who shared a common aspect of culture: parenthood absent partnership. The particular and unique phenomenon of single parenthood concurrent with pursuit of degrees in higher education institutions is a shared experience with implications for the greater social good. The differential or “hidden” reality of single parenthood impacts social welfare in significant and far-reaching ways, and matriculation and/or attrition of this section of the precariat (Standing, 2014), contributes to either the demise or foundation of collective formulations of society. Success for and inclusion of this group may potentially transform opportunities that ensure rightful participation in collective social enterprise for generations to come, thus reducing or eliminating precarity and the feminization of poverty. School culture, and access to shared enterprise via the human capital of education, is the avenue by which social identity may change in assisting in reformulation of broader social identity, impacting school outcomes in dependent children.

This study is unique in that few studies exist which identify as their focus the experience of single mothers in higher education. The forms and avenues of

advising provided single mother students needs re-envisioning. Finally, repositioning of financial resources could potentially enable single parents students to succeed academically while still meeting their financial obligations to support families. When degrees are obtained, entire family structures are impacted for successive generations; families with single mothers as heads of household benefit from degree completion in unique and particularly multi-faceted ways.

The study purposefully allowed subjects to self-select, because they possessed characteristics that met the requirements and scope of the study. Purposeful sampling included participants selected for inclusion in this study, because they were single parent student mothers who were enrolled in degree-conferring programs at the selected institution of higher education. I drew upon qualitative perspective, as suggested by Creswell (2013), and as well, identified personal biases, beliefs, and assumptions about the populace under investigation. I worked to revisit the subject of single parent studenthood with fresh eyes.

The study was conducted via Qualtrics survey to ascertain need and response. I sought to document personal and educational need experiences of single parents student mothers at both school and home settings. The length of the survey was 15 questions. Qualtrics survey data was analyzed thematically in order to arrive at a description of the single parent student mothers' educational needs and experiences.

## Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used in this study and are presented in alphabetical order:

**Cultural capital:** Cultural capital refers to a form of knowledge, skills, education and advantage that a person possesses. Parental possession of certain kinds of financial, educational, social, or cultural capital are transmitted (or fail to transmit) to dependents, thus negatively impacting educational outcomes and professional achievement for dependent children. Bourdieu (1984) contends that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to possess needed capital to navigate society successfully, because they lack resources and knowledge that is recognized and accepted by the dominant culture (Doob, 2013).

**Facilitators:** Persons who function as supporter, nurturer, guide to students needing academic, social, financial resource information and direction in order to compete successfully in advanced degree completion.

**Feminization of Poverty:** The increasing tendency for poor populations to be comprised primarily of women, single parent female head of household families (Pearce, 1978; Polakow, 1993).

**Fragile Families:** Families which contain dependents with female head as sole or primary source of financial support. Role strain is potential risk for primary caregiver. Additional risk factors present, such as special needs dependents, or

dependents with medical or developmental disabilities (Sabates, Duckworth, & Feinstein, 2011; Sen, 1999).

Head of Household: Tax status indicating sole provider for household of dependents under age eighteen.

Parent Students: Persons who enter the higher education realm while supporting dependent children (Sears, 2001).

Precariat: Persons who face uncertain futures, economic instability, and lack of family infrastructure while supporting dependents (Standing, 2014). Members of the precariat may present with anger, anxiety, despair, and alienation. To be “precaritised,” (p. 28) according to Standing, is to be subject to the pressures and experiences that lead to a precarious existence: of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle.

Single Parent Student Mother (SPSM): Female person who supports dependents without the assistance or presence of a partner while pursuing degrees in higher educational institutions (Katz, 2013).

Vulnerable Populations: For example, the precariat of single mothers, for whom change and insecurity is constant (Books, 2004; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007).

## Overview

Chapter 1 of this qualitative research study introduced the topic of the lived educational experiences and unique needs of single parent student mothers in the higher educational setting. Additionally, this chapter located the topic in the

context of its relationship with the researcher's own educational journey and other related studies.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature regarding the topic under investigation and maps out the theoretical framework through which the study will be examined. It also explores the main theoretical constructs that will be used in later chapters to help make sense of needs identified in the respondents' surveys.

Chapter 3 presents a qualitative perspective of the research design and explains how the survey was used in the study. The chapter also outlines the theoretical framework for choosing a qualitative approach for this study. Delimitations and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the results and the analysis of the data from the study survey. The emergent themes and identified needs are stated and described.

Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter and includes the discussion where the emergent themes will be closely examined and connected to the existing literature. The implications of the study for higher education are suggested and ideas for future research on the topic are also presented, as well as researcher's conclusions about the topic.



## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Framing of Problem and Purpose

In higher education, a group of candidates exists, silent, invisible, a group under-represented in collegiate endeavors, a group fraught with vulnerability, and whose sociological and psychological belief systems, and for whom balancing physical, professional and emotional responsibilities to families and work can impact matriculation or attrition at all levels of scholastic enterprise. This group can be characterized by multiplicity of roles, compromised quality and quantity of interactions within their personal and professional lives. These persons face some of the greatest challenges exiting the feminization of poverty: single parent student mothers (Books, 2004; Freeman, 2015; Polakow, 1993).

Single mothers are the fastest growing student demographic in the United States (Advisory Committee, 2012; Freeman, 2015; Threlfall, 2015). The US Department of Education (2014) projects a 15% increase in female enrollment into institutions of higher education by 2024, much of which the National Center for Education Statistics claims will be comprised of single parent student mothers (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2015) seeking entrance into higher education degree conferring programs for the first time (Threlfall, 2015). Furthermore, about 20% of undergraduate women are estimated to be single

mothers, absent financial, emotional, or physical support of partners or co-parents and 43 percent of the total student parent population, are single mothers (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014).

Findings suggest these parenting adult students negotiate multiple contexts in their daily lives (Freeman, 2015; Polakow, 1993) and are affected by broad patterns of disparity in support and opportunity (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2013; Shartzar, Long, & Benatar, 2015). Tehan (2007) argued single parent students are a special population who require different avenues of advisement than traditional students due to unique responsibilities and role strain. Stressors which would present ordinary challenges to traditional college students can present extraordinary difficulty for single parents who must schedule child care, care for sick children, and prioritize work/financial support with allocation of time for study in order to ensure academic success (Freeman, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to identify challenges “multiply disadvantaged” lone mothers (Gornick, Munzi, Sierminska, & Smeeding 2009; Lipman et al., 2010), seeking degrees in higher education face and to examine factors which may impact matriculation or attrition (Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Boutsen & Colbry, 1999; Cancian & Reed, 2009). To this end, this dissertation offers an overview of single parent student experiences obtained through pilot study data as well as primary study data obtained at Lakewood University from enrolled single parent student mothers. This dissertation underscores the

interconnectedness of experience that single parent student mothers share, highlighting significant areas of unmet need often overlooked among the single parent student populace, their families and communities.

### Theoretical Overview

Apple (2004) described a “differential reality” that is hidden, based on the claim that the “invisible hand of the market will inexorably lead to better schools” (p. 18). The neo-liberal market which has transformed the administrative state includes funding regimes and a regulatory state which is deemed to be working. Yet assumptions that social justice will evolve and precariat (uncertain or unpredictable social position) populaces will be cared for, remain unfounded, making a socially and culturally critical pedagogy essential, yet correspondingly difficult to accomplish (Standing, 2014). Social welfare, via contemporary accountability (Ambrosio, 2013) in a neo-liberal economy, is remanded to individuals resulting in individualized responsible subjects (Davies & Bansel, 2007). National survival is presumed best ensured by technology of surveillance and moral absolutism rather than collective accountability of social welfare and promotion of common social good via development of an ethic of caring (Noddings, 2003). Governmentality and new global order is promoted by policy rhetoric and institutionally-sanctioned discourse (Books, 2009).

Cassuto (2015) noted that the tendency to see education as a consumer good arises from loss of public support and the battle for control at the helm of

universities driven by “conflicting views regarding the purpose of higher education” (p. 211-14) and loss of partnership between institutions of higher education and their communities, of which single mothers are a significant part. In 2014, twelve million families in the United States were headed by single mothers, according to the US Census Bureau (Freeman, 2015). Single motherhood is now becoming a new norm. One in four children under the age of eighteen (17.4 million) are being raised by single mothers (singlemotherguide.com, 2015). Troublingly, children in families headed by single mothers are disproportionately poor (Books, 2004), with children headed by two parent families comprising only 8% of the poor, while “children headed by one-parent families comprise 39% of those in poverty” (p. 53).

Single parent students entering colleges represent a significant demographic, which deserves to be analyzed in terms of its significance to college education: underprepared and underserved single mother student parents (Levin & Kater, 2013). Twenty-five percent of college students are said to have dependents (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2013). Being a student parent substantially increases the likelihood of leaving college with no degree, with 53% of parents versus 31% of nonparents having left with no degree after six years (Polakow, 1993; Freeman, 2015; Institute for Women’s Research Policy, 2013). Low income parents are 25% less likely to obtain a degree than low income adults without children, and studies confirm that poverty is a significant factor in the schooling of dependent children (Books, 2009).

Student parents from this key demographic are often economically challenged, may be the first in their families to attempt college, and often are part or full-time employed. Books (2009) noted that poor, single mother families continue a “decline in household income” (p. 16-17), and risk hospitalization and food insecurity, because of reductions in public assistance due to welfare “reform,” or termination of welfare benefits. For single parents who rely on public assistance “college classes do not count as work” in most states, so single mothers risk losing welfare benefits like childcare vouchers and cash assistance by enrolling into degree-seeking programs, a result of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, which restricted the definition of work, and granted work credit largely for vocational training programs often with maximums that preclude achievement of a four-year degree (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006 ). Post-1996, TANF (temporary assistance for needy families) and other forms of aid have been restricted, causing enrollment of single parent student mothers to drop, despite the fact that 40% of single mother headed families fall below the poverty line and are in greatest need of the benefits and security higher education degrees can bring (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006). Other risks of insecurity include mothers electing to be in unsafe relationships that promise any form of financial assistance, with males who pose a risk to the physical safety of the mother’s dependent children. Additionally, mothers may be forced to do anything to hold on to jobs, even in the absence of suitable childcare. Single mothers are especially hard hit by job losses, because of ineligibility to collect an

unemployment benefit, due to part-time status (Books, 2004). Student parents, generally single mothers, operate under challenging time demands, with more than 40% working full-time or more, and over half spending thirty hours per week on caregiving activities (Freeman, 2015; Institute for Women's Research, 2016; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006). Student mothers are common and their success is crucial to family economic security (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 200; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013). Colleges are challenged to offer specialized or tailored programs or services that would support the unique needs of single parent students in order for them to succeed academically, and ultimately, professionally.

Reform for single parents in higher education in Israel arose out of community services projects in which social workers identified single mothers as the "group in the society facing more economic difficulties and challenges in allocating time to study" (Talman, 2010, p. A5 ). Sabates et al., (2011) and Polakow (1993) recognized the crucial component of parental achievement in the educational achievement of children: "Adults with poor literacy and numeracy skills have children who fare worse academically" (Books, 2004; Sabates, et al., 2011). A positive correlation was found between maternal advancement in education, even during the raising of children, meaning maternal educational endeavors undertaken as adults, demonstrated a significant positive impact on achievement by children in reading and mathematics as well as academic school readiness. Sabates et al. (2011) noted a positive and significant relationship

existed between parental levels of literacy and offspring cognitive development. Educating single mothers, even in later years and while raising dependents, supports achievement and optimal school outcomes of dependent children (Books, 2004).

To address the needs of single mothers in higher education, the following areas in current educational research, policy, and literature will be explored:

- 1) Argument that advances the need for institutional awareness and reform.
- 2) An historical overview of women's entry into education.
- 3) Challenges faced by single mothers in attaining higher education.

After a brief review of past and present educational changes, reasons for the articulation of a new educational ethic in the house of education -- one premised on caring and the advancement of social good -- will become clear, particularly as pertains to the invisibles of higher education: single parent student mothers. My study will help identify gaps in current advising, resourcing, and curriculum that will enable educators and administrators to modify existing institutional structure, policy, and practice to meet existing single parent student need (Noddings, 2003). Forms of advising, means of and transmission of financial assistance, program/curricular structure, and instructional practice can all be better tailored to meet the existing needs of single parent student mothers, whose increased time demands make meeting traditional degree requirements both costly and challenging.

## Argument

Single parent student needs are unique, yet issues of access, equity, and justice plague student efforts to better themselves and their families professionally, economically, and socially (Freeman, 2015; Halem, 2004; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006; Polakow, 1993; Sabates et al., 2011). For most single mothers, higher education is infeasible economically, physically, and socially. If financial, educational, and physical resources are in deficit, competing successfully for higher paying jobs remains out of reach for many single mothers lacking degree completion resources (Goldick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Polakow, 1993). Additionally, program support, in the form of unique methods of advising, modified course scheduling, and flexible attendance/assignment planning need to be set in place to positively impact attrition rates at higher educational institutions.

Competency based education ("Competency based education," 2014) may provide a useful option for allowing student mothers to progress at their own pace and may employ greater flexibility than traditional educational programs. Unfortunately, there are very limited offerings of CBE programs based on competencies and negative implications exist for government aid. So while CBE may be better suited to the needs of single parent student mothers, it may be more beneficial for institutional reform to focus on restructuring of existing programs to incorporate elements of CBE which can improve the efficacy of parenting student mothers by allowing a work at your own pace style of higher



education, while simultaneously working to ensure federal aid to these students does not suffer as a result.

Locating educational achievement within the framework of the larger social good can positively impact cultural, political and social capital (Coleman, 2006; Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006; Schinkel, 2003; Threlfall, 2015; Weininger & Lareau, 2003) for this part of the precariat (Standing, 2014) resulting in reduction of poverty, improved school outcome and achievement of dependents, and better emotional well-being of successive generations. Supporting the educational endeavors of single parent student mothers impacts successive generations (Fengliang, Longlong, & Dongmao, 2015; Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006) and has significant and far-reaching consequences for children of parents who are enrolled in higher education degree-seeking programs.

Institutional culture in higher education lacks representation of one group that is notably absent: single mothers. Yet single mothers are raising the future generation of contributors to the communal pool of cumulative, shared knowledge. The impact of unmet needs of mothers seeking degrees and the framework for change-seeking measures is significant:

Unless the caregiving responsibilities of low-income adults [single parent student mothers] are actively acknowledged and addressed, efforts to improve post-secondary access and completion for low-income adults, be

they through online learning, developmental education, institutional accountability, financial aid, or curriculum reform, are likely to fall short of their full potential for change. (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013, p. 1)

Matriculation of female single parents into college degree programs continues to make demands on student enrollment, financial services, and other support services universities offer, such as advising and childcare (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006). Improvement of both recognition of need and structuring of resources directed towards single parent educational endeavors might significantly reduce what has been called the feminization of poverty (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006; Threlfall, 2015).

### Feminine Poverty

An exploration of poverty and socioeconomic factors which give rise to disparity in poverty between males and females is necessary to understand the impact of education on family resourcing in single parent households (Polakow, 1993). Poverty levels for single females are disproportionate to those of single males, according to UNIFEM (Unifem.org, 2016). Feminine poverty is a consequence not only of lack of income, but also the result of gender biases in hiring and pay, present in both societies and governments (Chant, 2006; Chen et al., 2005; Shartzter, Long, & Benatar, 2015). Choices in employment and

opportunities in higher education are limited (Fudkuda-Parr, 1999) for women. As a result, basic limitations in equity, access, and social justice occur in education, employment, housing, and benefits (Boushey, 2008; Gornick, Munzi, Sierminska, & Smeeding, 2009). Feminine poverty has been causally linked to the rise in lone mother households (Chant, 2006; "Gender Inequalities," 2016; Polakow, 1993). Precaritized women are still among America's least likely to attend college (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010), but in great need of the benefits higher education can bestow on financial stability of families (Books, 2004; Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006): stable housing, healthcare access, wage parity, nutritional competence, educational equity. Diana Pearce (1978) in her seminal work, *The Feminization of Poverty: Women, Work, and Welfare*, coined the term *feminization of poverty*, resulting in a body of research dedicated to understanding economic issues of women globally. Other researchers, (Chant, 2006; Chen et al., 2005; Forste & Jacobsen, 2013; Fakuda-Parr, 1999; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Haleman, 2004; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007; Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2006; Kanjij, 2010; Katz, 2013; Noddings, 2003; Rendon, 2014; Rizer, 2005; Sen, 1999; Skali, 2001; Stone & Nyman, 1994; Talman, 2010; Tiamyu & Mitchell, 2001; Ziol-Guest, Duncan, & Kalil, 2015) have since noted risk factors that place women at risk for poverty: limited educational opportunity, hiring and pay disparity, non-benefited part time positions, lack of housing and healthcare (Babcock & Lashever, 2003; Boushey, 2008; Carmichael, Hulme, Sheppard, & Connel, 2008).

Where economic, demographic, and sociocultural factors intersect, poverty assumes cyclical dimensions (Boushey, 2008; Cancian & Reed, 2009; “Gender Inequalities,” 2010; Skalli, 2001). Lack of access to higher education results in lack of hiring in fully benefited positions. Lack of benefits and absent degrees results in lack of adequate healthcare coverage, lack of retirement, and lower pay. Lower pay results in inability to pay for adequate childcare, resulting in children with lower academic outcomes, increased incidence of illnesses and accidents, and higher rates of truancy. Healthcare and education inadequacies debilitate a women’s ability to earn an adequate income (Horrell, 2007; Gornick, Munzi, Sierminska, & Smeeding, 2009; Lee, 2013). Lone motherhood and interrelated facets of social bias women face when attempting to obtain formal employment act to perpetuate and exacerbate existing risk for female poverty (Ms. Foundation for Women, 2013; Babcock & Laschever, 2003; Shartzter, Long, & Benetar, 2015; Polakow, 1993). Additionally, childcare responsibilities prevent women from earning as much as men, resulting in households with inadequate income and resources. Occupational gender segregation and a gender wage gap (Allard & Danziger, 2002; Babcock & Laschever, 2003) fail to allow the majority of women quality work, benefited positions, access to adequate childcare, housing, healthcare, retirement, or equal wage for equal work. When income is insufficient to raise children, nutritional and educational deficits occur (Bianchi, 1999), deepening the cycle of poverty. Deprivation passes from one generation to the next, because children in lone mother households fare worse

academically, socially, and emotionally than those in male-headed households (Freeman, 2015; Fukuda-Parr, 1999; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Horrell & Krishnan, 2007; Kanji, 2010). Female-headed households are particularly susceptible to poverty as a result of lack of access to opportunities to attain a decent standard of living along with basic life resources such as education, healthcare, and housing (Allard & Sheldon, 2002; Babcock & Lashevar, 2003; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008).

Improving educational attainment for single parent mothers also has multigenerational implications. Family economic security and parental education are irretrievably linked to successive generational benefits, in particular improving children's educational, economic, and social outcomes. Single motherhood raises special issues in regards to the need for an ethic of caring (Noddings, 2003) to be both developed and valued by institutions of higher education as gender injustices continue to perpetuate the feminization of poverty, with repercussions for successive generations.

Education which demonstrates respect for, and integration of, an internationalist and anti-colonial perspective (Rendon, 2014) can be instrumental in breaking the cycle of feminine poverty (Books, 2004) by promoting women's educational endeavors and achievements, and elevating opportunities for better-paying, benefited positions, which in turn, enable access to childcare, healthcare, and education for dependents. Higher education has the potential to prepare single mothers for careers in academia and teaching, as well as reaffirming

commitment to transforming community by engaging education from a platform of social justice, equity, and integration. Curricular ideals should seek to enable students to become educated as humanists, to contribute as humanists. Society can be significantly positively impacted by female education (Casutto, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Nodding, 2003; Sabates, Duckworth, & Feinstein, 2011). Rendon (2014) advocates preparing single parent student mothers to make sound ethical and moral decisions regarding political, social and cultural situations that will ensure the world continues forward in a “peaceable, equitable, and survivable manner” (p. 214) by modeling access, equity and sustainable social justice for precaritized individuals. Pedagogy which is holistic, integrative, and equity-based can fundamentally transform the purpose of academic and civic mission, as well as changing the culture of higher education (Rendon, 2014). In studying the experiences of single mothers, we, as researchers, can ask, “What kind of world can we build?” If we are purposeful and passionate (Gergen, 2014), in our visions and inquiries, we can be participatory in creating *what is to come*: knowledge through praxis, represented through ongoing action that is future-forming.

Though awareness of diversity in higher education, such as the precariat of single motherhood is being raised (Winslade, 2015), awareness must be postceded by commitment and action in educational practice in order to produce sustainable access, equity, and social justice for precaritized individuals, such as

single mothers: “Dialogical consciousness raising educational paradigms could have the potential to change student worldviews” (Freire, 1968 p. 4).

### Historical Purview

In this section, the inception of American higher education will be explored, detailing when and how women began participation in higher educational endeavors in the United States of America. At the time of the American Revolution, nine colleges existed in what would later become the United States. Rudolph (1962) described these institutions as “temples of piety and intellect in the wilderness” (p. 3). One of the earliest leanings, immediately upon the heels of shelter, a house of worship and a “framework of government” (p. 3), the founding people longed for a means, a vehicle through which to advance *learning* and “perpetuate it into posterity” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 4). Models for original institutions of learning arose from Cambridge and Oxford trained “gentlemen” (p. 4), of which there were approximately 130, in the 1770s and 80s, who fashioned higher education after their alma maters, founded upon a need for “adornment of cultured men” (p. 6) and to ensure the New England youth were piously educated in “good letters and manners” (p. 7).

In the 250 years following their inception, the colleges underwent changes in governance, structure, funding and purpose. The greatest change occurred in 1867, defined by Ralph Waldo Emerson as “a cleavage occurring in the hitherto granite of the past and a new era is nearly arrived” (Rudolph, 1962, p. 241),-- a

time when women gained entry into the elite institutions of higher education, which had heretofore barred their participation. This time period following the Civil War was identified as a time when the “old time colleges” (p. 242) would have to decide whether they would be instruments of the past or future and would have to meet the imperative needs of an expanding industrial nation and expanding national power. Between 1861 and 1865 the first colleges were created that made note of the failure to address the educational needs of women in refusing to allow them entry to higher education, at the time the “largest group of underserved minorities” (p. 244). Collegiate rights were established for women. However, women had been attempting to gain access for the previous 100 years, beginning with Lucinda Foote, who, at age 12, in 1783, was examined and found fully qualified except in regard to sex, to enter the freshmen class of Yale University (Rudolph, 1962). In the century following, many key feminists emerged to drive reform in religion: Antoinette Brown; Amelia Bloomer, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott. Inevitably, reform in education followed (Rudolph, 1962). But the day of admitting women to higher education was launched by Oberlin College in 1837, though collegiate rights for women would take another thirty years to become formalized (Rudolph, 1962). In the next 100 years, battles were waged, and women were admitted into higher education where women had never been before. The twentieth century would witness unprecedented numbers of women pursuing higher education (Rudolph, 1962) culminating in 1960 with a US Supreme Court order (*McLeod v Starnes*)



ordering a divorced father to provide, in support of a daughter living with her mother, “monies for college education” (p. 314).

As noted by Rudolph (1962), women’s education was largely a function of two agencies: land-grant colleges and state universities, responsible for “elevating the collegiate education of women” (p. 372). Land grant colleges were designated by a state to receive benefits of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 in the form of federally controlled lands which could be sold to raise money to endow colleges whose missions were to focus on education in agriculture, science, military science, and engineering in response to the Industrial Revolution and changing social class. In 1855 the University of Iowa opened doors to women, then the University of Wisconsin in 1863 (Rudolph, 1962).

Today, women are enrolled into undergraduate programs at higher numbers than men. Women are now being included in higher education at rates unparalleled in American history (Arsand, 2015; Collegesourcenetwork.com). For example, California State University reports female enrollment at 62%. In 2010, 37% of women had attained bachelor’s degrees compared to 35% of men (United States Census, 2011; Educational Attainment in the United States, 2010). In 2003, 1.35 females graduated with bachelor’s degrees for every male (nber.org) while ratios of enrolled men to women in 2005 were 43/57 (Marklein, 2005). Implications for single mothers in higher education are significant, if they are enabled to achieve educationally on a par with non-parenting peers.

The twenty-first century has forced nations into a global economy and community, inviting educators to explore the various literacies non-traditional student populaces bring to the classroom and to “cease our indifferent stance to the diverse backgrounds and multicultural communities from which student populaces are arising” (Conrad & Gasman, 2015, p. 20) --including single mother parent students.

### Challenges for Single Mothers In Accessing Higher Education

In this section, an exploration of the various challenges single parent student mothers must overcome in order to achieve in higher education will be detailed, with an overview of primary areas of particular challenge: access, enrollment, suitable childcare, adequate housing, financial support, and time to engage in studies—not to mention a suitable environment in which to engage in academic pursuits and support from professors and instructors to help in meeting absences and flexible course requirements are just a few impediments single mother students encounter on the road to procuring a college degree (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). Freeman (2015) identified five key areas of deficit for single parent student mothers engaged in degree-completion programs: Finding time to study, meeting financial obligations, completing education within allotted time frame, finding time with children, and finding childcare during study/class time. For purposes of this dissertation, these

challenges have been grouped into three categories: precarity, resourcing, and rolestrain.

#### 1) Precarity.

Matriculation of female single parents into college degree programs continues to impact student enrollment, financial services, and other support services universities offer. Improvement of both recognition of need and structuring of resources directed towards single parent educational endeavors can significantly reduce feminization of poverty (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Polakow, 1993; Threlfall, 2015).

Responsibility for “human well-being” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 248) occurs when we collectively and, by extension, educationally, accept responsibility for the vulnerable and marginalized, such as single mothers, for whom the feminization of poverty is a daily reality. Standing, (2014) developed the concept of precarity, a term which arose in the 1980’s in reference to a “working poor” as means of describing a new class of individuals whose circumstances are subject to change without warning or notice, characterized by lack of foundation. Additionally, the precariat present with the four A’s: anger, anxiety, anomie (despair), and alienation. To be “precaritised,” according to Standing (p. 28), is to be subject to the pressures and experiences that lead to a precarious existence: of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle. Precaritised individuals may be treated as denizens with limited rights stemming from an external locus of

control, rather than citizens possessing a full spectrum of human and legal rights. The experience of a single mother precariat is tinged with inequality at the starting gate (Books, 2004), struggle, uncertainty, debt, and humiliation (Standing, 2014), due to the temporary, precarious nature of their subsistence. The spread of “precaritisation,” (p. 32) and accompanying anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation stems from frustration at blocked avenues for creating a meaningful life, which, for single mothers and dependents, encompasses access to basic healthcare, feasible education, adequate housing, and benefited employment, upon which lone mothers rely for survival and stable home life (Buvenic, 1997). As Standing deftly identified, the precariat is neither “victim, villain, or hero—it is just a lot of us” (p. 315).

Understanding resource distribution (Books, 2004; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008) is of crucial importance in ascertaining and meeting need in the precariat of single mothers. Gasman and Conrad (2015) denoted that ensuring equal access to college is only half of the challenge of equal access to educational opportunity in a diverse society. Equal access – and thus, opportunity—means institutional grasp and valuation of the cultural, social, and educational resources, the *cultural capital* (Bourdieu, 1984) unique students bring to college, including the precariat of single parent mothers who are matriculating into higher education institutions.

## 2) Inadequate resourcing.

Sole mothers may be underprepared in traditional ways, yet offer many

cultural and social skills, largely unrecognized, which will serve them well in pursuit of advanced degrees, including work experience often lacking in the traditional student profile. Mainstream institutional models of academic experience may be indifferent to the needs of a diverse society in which cultural strands of experience are unique, such as those represented by single parent students who concurrently serve as head of household with dependent children. Further, single mothers may be unable to compete academically with those who are fully resourced, minus the additional responsibilities of fulfilling two parenting roles and working full-time to support families. Someone has to ensure the families continue forward, and putting food on the table and a roof over their heads often falls to the single parent mothers, who can ill afford additional time for study and class preparation that students without family and work responsibilities can. Multiple factors intersect to act upon the experiences of single mothers pursuing higher education degrees. Single parent studenthood requires additional forms of support and advising in order to exceed physical and psychological constraints of parenthood. Students can succeed and many are motivated to do so. But administrators and program heads can best support the aspirations of its single parent mothers by recognizing the unique needs of single parents students and planning appropriately in program structures in order to maximize support offered this populace (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010; Haleman, 2014).

In addition to structural barriers faced by single parent female students (Katz, 2013), in which unique “costs” (p. 275) are faced by those pursuing higher education, academic skills of underprepared single mothers exhibit key deficits leaving them unable to compete successfully at the college level, particularly in basic areas of reading, writing, and mathematics (Lipman, 2010). Backgrounds deficient in traditional learning media and limited higher education, coupled with significant obligations to family and community may impede academic progress of parenting single mother students (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). For many single parent student mothers, sources of support are scarce (Boutsen & Colbry, 1991; Polakow, 1993). Additionally, program parameters, such as full course loads which result in four-year program completion and limited absence allowance, may be too constraining with the added variables of parenthood and work responsibilities (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). Additional accommodation may need to be made in order to facilitate both access and equity in higher education degree programs, to accommodate the needs for unique forms of advising, flexible class hours, programs structured to lengthen degree procurement, lengthened deadlines on assignments, and absence policies which accommodate parents who may be required to care for sick children on a periodic basis (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Threlfall, 2015).

### 3) Role strain.

Role strain is an enormous complexity plaguing the educational journeys of single parent student mothers, and yet institutional policy and procedure has

notably omitted reference to the unique needs and challenges parent students face. Absence of current literature on single mothers in higher education indicates the role of parenthood in postsecondary outcomes has been largely overlooked in the research community, underscoring the invisibility of single parent student mothers (Forste & Jacobsen, 2013). Low income parents are 25% less likely to obtain a degree than low income adults (Books, 2004; Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008) and 53% of student parents leave college absent a bachelor's degree after six years (Haleman, 2004).

Stress from degree requirements can negatively impact personal health and other relationships, and result in psychological strain from multiplicity of roles, or *role strain*, arising from single mothers having to shoulder work responsibilities, childrearing roles of both parents, and the duties of educating themselves in order to better provide for dependents (Goldrick-Rab & Sorenson, 2010). Talman (2010) recognized the unique challenges of single mothers: lack of available childcare, insufficient money to pay for childcare, financial strain of additional monies for tuition, difficulty studying evenings as traditional students can, money needed to sustain family. Single parent students, are more likely to quit school, pointing to attrition as a source of women's susceptibility to poverty (Bianchi, 1999; Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Ziol-Guest, Duncan, & Kalil, 2015). Research reveals however, that maternal schooling is the dominant predictor of differences in educational attainment for dependents (Freeman, 2015; Fengliang, Longlong, & Dongmao, 2015; Gibbons & Woodside,

2014; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Polakow, 1993; Sabates et al., 2013; Ziolk-Guest et al., 2015).

Challenges women face in higher education are exacerbated for single mothers. Forty-three percent of the total student parent population at undergraduate institutions are single mothers (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2014; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). While traditional college students may work, many single mothers work full-time, fulfill two parenting roles, and then enroll into degree programs qualifying them as full-time students (Freeman, 2015). Absence of partnership places the educational aspirations of single parent student mothers at risk of failure (Pearce, 1978; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Rendon, 2014; Threlfall, 2015).

Access, from admissions to advising, exhibits deficits in serving the needs of single mother college students. Despite women being admitted into higher education, a large group of females who matriculate in as employed persons with dependent children do not fit the traditional profile of entering college students (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). As Books (2004), noted, "inequality at the starting gate" (p. 143) creates disparities that perpetuate achievement gaps, despite educating under the auspices of promoting positive social change through practice. Single mother students who arrive on campus with unique challenges, such as lack of appropriate resources like partners to care for children while single mothers are at class and work, financial support to care for children while attending school, available outside of home childcare, and quiet



study times to compete successfully in academics, may be limited in their abilities to succeed in traditional learning environments (Freeman, 2015).

Single mothers may need to be absent more frequently due to sick children, may be unable to attend traditional day classes as they need to work to support dependents, while evening study time may be consumed with feeding families, assisting with homework, and readying children for bed, factors that significantly complicate issues of matriculation and lead to attrition of single mother students in higher educational endeavors (Baldwin, 1991; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Threlfall, 2015).

Bloom (2009) identified unique obstacles which impede impoverished women from seeking success and an “exit from poverty” via higher education (p. 483). Welfare recipients are often caught in a double trap for welfare and social reform recipients as current policy, identified by Bloom as *structural barriers*, while ostensibly seeking to assist mothers out of poverty, often curtails the very means of doing so: “College classes do not count as ‘work’ in most states, so many of those who return to school lose access to welfare benefits” (p. 485). Furthermore, the 60 month time limit for benefits receipt, for example, is insufficient for single mothers with dependents to procure a degree. Support is needed for extended time periods as mothers work toward degree completion. Most states have found that a very small proportion of recipients reach the time limit after 60 months of continuous benefit receipt (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). The enhanced state welfare-to-work programs increased the number of

families who exited welfare in the 1990s. But these exits did not result in long term family success in terms of procuring adequate benefited employment and higher education which would enable mothers to secure median wage-earning positions. Some states have shorter state time limits and/or have imposed large numbers of sanctions that closed the cases of recipients who were deemed noncompliant with work requirements --or they have removed the adult from the grant, creating a child-only case (Bloom & Winstead, 2002; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008).

Of the 12 million single parent families in the United States, 80% percent are headed by the mother, and 4.1 million low income working families are headed by working mothers (Freeman, 2015; Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). Low-income female-headed working families are increasing and make up 22% of all working families but *39% of low income working families*. Sixty five percent of children who are low-income reside with female-headed working families (Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014). Finally, half of low-income working mothers are employed in service sector jobs which offer low wages, limit hours, and fail to provide benefits such as healthcare and paid sick leave (Freeman, 2015; Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014). In short, there is an over-representation of mothers among the working poor (Freeman, 2015; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Threlfall, 2015).

Single mothers face a higher education dilemma (Freeman, 2015). Sanctions are financial penalties for failing to comply with work or other

requirements of state welfare programs. They have been a central feature of the welfare reforms of the 1990s. Although time limits may receive more attention in the media, many more families have been directly affected by sanctions, and sanctions have arguably played a greater role in negatively reshaping welfare recipients' day-to-day experiences (Bloom & Winstead, 2002) and perpetuating the impoverishment of single working mothers and their dependents by impeding or preventing single mothers from higher education pursuits (Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008). The *Working Poor Families Policy Brief* (2014) recommends implementation of state policy actions that are sensitive to the needs of working mothers:

- Increasing access and success for low-income working mothers in post secondary education.
- Creating a strong network of supports to strengthen female-headed low income families
- Assure basic family needs are met
- Create and expand tuition assistance programs that make post-secondary education programs accessible to low income working mothers
- Make financial aid available that is need-based for part time students to be utilized for short term occupational programs leading to a credential
- Allow undocumented students to pay in-state tuition rates

- Provide increased and dedicated academic and personal supports for low income working mothers including affordable high quality child care and strategies that promote student parent success
- Restructure adult basic education and community college programs to better accommodate low incoming working mothers and second language learners.

### Measures

Education as consumer good has resulted in loss of public funding and community support due to the conflicting purpose of higher education at the helm of educational leadership (Cassuto, 2015). Cassuto argued education needs to be tailored to more effectively meet the needs of students, including the underprepared and non-traditional populaces.

To meet deficits in college preparedness, community colleges began offering basic or developmental courses in an attempt to elevate skills of the underprepared in order to ready them to compete successfully with peers at college level with college level literacy skills (Levin & Kater, 2013). Although colleges have been criticized for lack of perceivable mission and being in a constant state of flux (Levin & Kater, 2013), variability could be perceived as an asset in terms of engaging new valuations and embracing non-traditional literacies, including those possessed by single mother students.

However, child care access on college campuses has been declining, with

only 47 percent of community colleges having a child care center on campus in 2012, a 10 percent drop since 2002 (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Attention to the needs of single parent student mothers can significantly improve educational outcomes for single parent students. Institutional resources could be reconfigured to meet the unique needs of its single parent student population through programs offering free or reduced fee childcare, weekend or evening classes, and flexible funding for parents who are already stressed supporting dependents. Tailoring accelerated or lengthened program degrees for those who must function as sole support for dependent children and who often need specialized student services could help reduce stratification in institutions of higher learning (Ambrosio, 2013) and improve accountability practices which support hopes and dreams, aspirations of vulnerable populations.

### Theoretical Framework

The impact of unmet needs of mothers seeking degrees is significant. Caregiving responsibilities of single parent student mothers impair and intrude on efforts to improve post secondary performance in degree completion-seeking, causing single mothers to fall short of their full potential to change their lives and the lives of their dependents. (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2013; Jones-DeWeever & Gault, 2008; Threlfall, 2015).

It is the intent of this study draw attention to the plight of single parent

student mothers and to raise awareness of the unique challenges with which they are faced when enrolled in degree-conferring programs, as well as how the praxis of identity and achievement interact via the intersectionality of educational experience to impact educational outcomes, both for parent student mothers and, ultimately, dependent children whose mothers are engaged in higher educational endeavors.

The study's purpose is to reveal the unique challenges present in the daily experiences of single parent student mothers in higher education. It is hoped research findings will enable higher educational administrators to restructure programs and means of support to enable single parent student mothers to transcend constraints placed on them by gender and class—matriarchal single parenthood, and to enter into decision-making and reformulation of social identities, which enable them to contribute productively to the collaborative formulation of society.

Transformational leadership (TLT) theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Burns, 1978; Devanna & Tichy, 1990; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Kezar, 2008; Marion & Gonzales, 2014) is defined as distributed leadership with multiple defining characteristics, which present in leadership practice. First, TLT asserts that transformational leadership recognizes and exploits an existing gap in followership and further, that it seeks to satisfy the needs of institutions and organizations, as well as higher needs of individuals in helping individuals and organizations to fulfill contractual obligations, to meet organizational needs, and

to better the institution via betterment of individuals. Articulation of mission, vision, and organizational goals are cornerstones of TLT and transformational leaders transcend self-interest for the good of the group or organization (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). Transformational leadership motivates followers. TLT's behavior and actions guide constituents toward individual and institutional success. TLTs serve as role models in helping individuals in communities supersede traditional contributions to collective communal outcome. TLT will guide in explaining organizational behavior, and in understanding how professional identity and the intersectionality of identity/motivation/competencies, and negotiated meaning/identity (multiplicity of roles/identities, contextualized by situational variables and the absence/presence of others), influences access to social, political, and cultural capital and opportunity (Bourdieu, 1984) and how institutional grasp and valuation of cultural, social, and educational resources influences student/educator interactions. Institutional identity, faculty identity, and student identity serve as praxes by which cultural capital is exchanged. The underpinnings of TLT-- "collective based leadership" --illuminates where and how interactions and relational considerations can aid in understanding how organizations work, thus leading to change implicit in the word "transformative" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 157) in shaping, moving, and inspiring large groups of diverse people. The question is, how and by what means can practitioners compel these interactions forward for the greatest social (collective) good?

Transformational leadership improves organizational effectiveness

(Marion & Gonzalez, 2014, p. 89; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). TL theorists argue that four key characteristics in educational and institutional leadership are crucial to the formulation of the transactions which result in transformation: 1) charisma or idealized influence; 2) inspirational motivation; 3) intellectual stimulation, and, 4) individualized consideration/attention (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Marion & Gonazales, 2014, p. 158). Further, that transformational leaders “act from purely moral, selfless, and ...socially responsible places” (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 175). Yet the phenomena of corporatization and political context of the university act in “shaping of power structures, competition for resources, and internal political power struggles” (p. 176).

Applied Critical Leadership arises from an intersectionality of transformational leadership, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory, resulting in the reconceptualization of applied critical leadership as a “strengths based model of leadership practice where educational leaders consider the social context of their educational communities and empower individual members of these communities based on the educational leaders’ identities” (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013, p. 5). Critical pedagogy is concerned with restructuring traditional relationships in learning communities to a point where new knowledge, grounded in the collective experiences of teaching and learning community members is produced through meaningful dialogue. Critical pedagogy can empower people, through education, to influence their world (Santamaria & Santamaria, 2013). Transformational leadership empowers to people to fulfill



their contractual obligations, meet the needs of the organization, and better the institution.

The conceptual framework of TLT offers a lens through which to view research objectives, findings, and to identify and understand relationships within variables and the triangulation of these experiences. Ontological assumptions embrace the multiplicity of experiences present in student voices, including single parenthood concurrent with studenthood.

The caretaking ideal in education mission and vision is especially relevant to the needs of student single parents (Casuto, 2015). Scribner and Crow (2012) suggested increased attention to skill competencies and technological components of success are influencing current outcomes in education rather than human qualities. Noddings (2003) feels professional identities that center on the human qualities of caring/caregiver roles will result in optimized educational outcomes. Noddings suggested that educators and administrators alike can assume identities as caregivers, and that an *ethic of caring* should underlay dialogue, practice, and confirmation, meaning discussions, classroom practices, and recognition of teachers' successes should arise from a foundation of caring, rather than, as Scribner and Crow suggested, focusing on the technical aspects of competencies as measures of success. This echoes Scribner and Crow's (2012) concerns that identities as humans have been ceded to roles as professional competency tabulators.

The notion of caring in higher education, according to Noddings (2003),

involves a fundamental interrelatedness in reciprocal human good, and educational nourishment and guidance as hallmarks of institutional caring in distribution and allocation of resources and planning. Central to this notion of institutional caring are caring and caregiver as roles educators and administrators may assume. Planning assesses the “picture” of caring and education, and identification and maintenance of the ethical ideal is the primary function of the educational community (p. 180). Nurturing an ethical ideal occurs in three forms: dialogue, practice, and confirmation (Noddings, 2003). Dialogue enables discussion to occur about issues which impact students. Noddings next advocates a dismantling of professional structures in order to facilitate dialectical growth (p. 189), in practice and to regularly ascertain which arrangements best support caring in curriculum. Finally, confirming which classroom practices are working, nurtures educators’ ethical ideals, allows development of unique strands of assessing and planning in meeting of needs of single parent student mothers. Success in their higher education endeavors impacts success and outcome for dependents as well, and is instrumental in breaking the cycle of poverty. Access, from admissions to advising in institutions of higher education, exhibits gaping deficits in serving the needs of college students. Single mothers, in particular, suffer from the loss of a suitable ethic in higher education mission and vision, an ethic that adapts a caretaking ideal to meet the demands of students and which facilitate access to higher education through tailored advising, modified curriculum, augmented financial resourcing, and flexible program scheduling

(Cassuto, 2015).

Access to education promotes positive social change through practice. Though national financial aid is available, the unique family structures of single parent student mothers often confound both process and access, and immediate needs are not addressed, such as housing, financial support, flexible course scheduling, modified absence policy, and suitable childcare. Additionally, traditionally structured four-year degrees only fit well if one is young, single, with presence of parental support. The need for additional forms of financial support outside governmental norms, consistent with the unique needs of single parent students is pressing (Boutsen & Colbry, 1991). Additionally, student parents encompass a wide variety of roles including work, parenting and meal provision, and classroom support including advising and alternatively structured program requirements to help allay role strain. Stressors present in single parent students' lives, multiplicity of role strain, result in need for advising/caring that would enable degree procurement while maintaining and meeting work and parenting responsibilities (Chant, 2006).

Awareness of diversity in higher education without commitment and action in educational practice results in a system of education bereft of dialogical consciousness raising educational paradigms, which could have the potential to change student worldviews (Freire, 1993). Recognition of the role overt caring plays in the success of single parent students in higher educational endeavors may be instrumental in program success and as well in advancing social good as

a whole by reducing family poverty.

### Closing

The challenge of providing equal access to higher education for students who arrive on campus with unique challenges, such as single mothers, lack of appropriate resources such as partners to care for children while single mothers are at class and work, inadequate financial support to care for children while attending school, available outside of home childcare, significant obligations to family and community, insufficient quiet study times to compete successfully in academics, and daytime classes, offered at times when single mothers need to work to support families, limit single mothers' abilities to succeed in traditional learning environments. Additionally, backgrounds deficient in traditional learning media may impair academic success. Single mothers may need to be absent more frequently due to sick children, may be unable to attend traditional day classes as they need to work to support dependents, and evening study time is consumed with feeding families, assisting with homework, and readying children for bed. Childcare access on college campuses has been declining, with only 47 percent of community colleges having a child care center on campus in 2012, a 10 percent drop since 2002, due to funding cuts from national government (Institute for Women's Research Policy, 2013). All of these factors significantly impact issues of matriculation and attrition of single mother students in higher educational endeavors.

Possession of literate skills allows individuals to become fully functional members of community life, contributors to the negotiations which formulate the pool of cumulative knowledge. The human capital of higher education, by its very nature, incorporates the resources of all, to function as a collective representation of the shared ideas, thinking, and resources of individuals for whom the college serves as an educational forum. The conversation and thought which occur within the walls of classrooms are the result of community members engaging in complex mental operations that are based in the interpretive communities of each member. Withholding participation of any community member, including the precariat of single mothers, fails to account for the contributions of those individuals and deprives marginalized and vulnerable populations of the benefits of information exchange and participation in the collective formulations of society: “Changes that bring about inclusion for one group...can have far-reaching benefits for everyone” (Mitchneck, Smith & Latimer, 2016, p. 149). The status quo has traditionally excluded women from broad participation in academic endeavors, with gender disparity resulting in compromise of innovation and loss of global competitiveness (Mitchneck et al., 2016). Barriers in culture, structure, and practice must be transformed if the feminization of poverty is to be discernibly impacted, and “inclusion of one group can, via intersectionality, transform opportunities for all marginalized groups “ (p. 148-149).

The context of school culture can confirm or deny misrepresentation of social identity. Colleges today are still “geared toward childless 18-24 year-olds who are supported by their parents” (Freeman, 2015). A precariat populace can be excluded, muted and silenced by dominant discourse, and remain invisible in higher education (Goldrick & Sorenson, 2010) because non-traditional students’ identities and experiences are deemed “inferior” and they may struggle to maintain relationships with family and friends while forging new relationships with faculty and peers (Garces, 2012). The challenge is not always access but rather valuing non-traditional students resources and experiences, and increasing opportunity for students to obtain degrees (Garces, 2012).

Institutional focus can best serve lone female parents by locating educational achievement within the framework of the larger social good, a notion which has not fared well in a neo-liberal era (Books, 2009). College degrees can provide a means of financial stability and immense social and professional benefits for sole providers in single-parent homes. Reduction of poverty, improved outcome and achievement of dependents, and better emotional well-being of successive generations are not insignificant benefits of supporting the educational endeavors of single parent student mothers (Books, 2009).

Single mothers remain largely invisible in higher education today (Goldrick & Sorenson, 2010). Media for changing identity will include the opportunity to participate in decision making because a participatory role allows for responsive formulation of a broader sociocultural identity (Smyth & Hattam, 2001) outside

the constraints of parenthood and absent partnership. Standing (2014) noted single mothers pursuing degrees in higher education are seeking full and rightful participation in social structures from which their representation has been notably absent. Freedom, observed Standing (2014), is manifested in collective action, and the precariat want freedom and basic security. Single mothers are pursuing higher education so that they may have control over their lives and sustainable autonomy, and an ecologically feasible future for their children (Standing, 2014). Rather than the individualistic freedom of the commodified, the precariat of single mothers are seeking a revival of social solidarity, what Standing terms “emancipatory egalitarianism” that is geared to the precariat (p. 269), and with this a recovering of their identities as citizens.

Extraordinary means of social support, community support and unique means of rising above the challenges faced by single parent student mothers needs to be set in place by institutions if single mothers are to truly leave poverty behind and enter the world of competing for professional success effectively. Yet most colleges do not offer specialized or tailored programs or services that would support the unique needs of single parents students in order for them to succeed academically. Arsand (2015) noted single parent students pursue college degrees and certificated programs at for-profit schools primarily to seek benefits of accelerated degree programs along with enhanced convenience and streamlined student services at for-profit schools. But most single parent mothers cannot afford to enroll at for-profit institutions (Tehan, 2007). One of the ways

colleges could enhance appeal to single parent students is by adopting accelerated course offerings while concurrently advertising their relative affordability and high level of academic rigor (Baldwin, 1991).

Addressing needs of single parent mothers presents a unique challenge for change within the framework of larger institutional change. However, higher education institutions are rising to the challenge. Talman (2010) highlighted a program designed to meet the needs of single mothers at Tel Hai Academic College in Israel, offering a newly devised academic program of study for single mothers predicated on free babysitting, free tuition, special study hours, and an annual stipend, with degree conferral occurring at four years instead of three. Additionally, single mothers take classes only one day per week, so students need only be away from work, home, or dependents one day each week.

Withholding participation of any community members, including the precariat of single mothers, fails to account for the contributions of those individuals and deprives marginalized and vulnerable populations of the benefits of information exchange and participation in the collective formulations of society: “Changes that bring about inclusion for one group...can have far-reaching benefits for everyone” (Mitchneck, Smith & Latimer, 2016, p. 149).



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

Creswell (2013) advanced the notion that the aim of a researcher in qualitative research is to understand and explain. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of single mothers in higher education: barriers, sources of support, challenges, needs, and attributions of success. To understand the educational experiences of single parent student mothers, self-reported and self-identified need was gathered via survey data. The intent of this study was to examine and describe the educational experiences of parenting students in their higher educational school setting. A study was conducted on the target populace to allow the researcher to piece together a comprehensive portrait of experience in order to create a rich-text description of the experience of single parent studenthood.

This study utilized feminist ontologies, constructivist argument, and discourse analysis to piece together information gathered through administration of survey questions in order to describe the lived educational experiences of parenting students who participated in this study. This study sought to understand factors which may impact matriculation or attrition of single parent mothers in higher education. The researcher sought to gather and understand single parent student perspectives of those enrolled in higher education degree-

seeking programs concurrent with part- or full-time employment and while parenting dependents under the age of eighteen. This study sought to ascertain whether existing higher education structures and managerial/organizational practices lead to college attendance or present adverse consequences for families of unmarried parent students through institutional barriers and to identify the range of needs presenting for unpartnered women parent students to reach degree completion.

Challenges may present insurmountable obstacles to parents who must fill both parenting roles, and who work full time to provide for dependents while maintaining benefits to ensure their family's survival. Additional burdens of attending classes and completing lengthy and time-constraining assignments as well as having to schedule and pay for child care during class time or group project assignments can tip the scale against degree completion for single parents already strained with caring for dependent children alone and assuming sole provider roles.

### Research Questions

Research questions were initially designed and subsequently revised to allow the researcher to explore specific areas of identified need and support through the lived experiences of its subjects. Single parent student mothers served as the primary source of knowledge, with veracity an underlying assumption of truth in student voices. Through description of participants' shared

experiences, commonalities in both barriers and successes formed a basis for analyzing student survey data. The areas of focus examined in this exploratory research effort were: profiling of the particular precariat of single mothers in higher education; barriers to single parent student mothers in higher education; unique needs of single parent student mothers engaged in higher educational endeavors.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What needs are identified by single parent students in degree completion programs?
2. In what ways do student parents think advisors, teachers, administrators reposition resources to better serve their needs?

## Methodology and Research Design

### Qualitative Methodology

The decision to employ a qualitative research design originated from a dearth of research studies addressing the single parent student experience in higher education. The advantage of utilizing qualitative methods to collect and analyze data is to fill a gap in literature of the single parent student experience in the voices of single parent student mothers, highlighting both needs and challenges of parenting while engaged in degree-seeking endeavors. The

qualitative approach allowed for expression of the subjective experience of barriers, challenges and support measures present in higher education (Creswell, 2007) and in degree-conferring programs as expressed by female single parent students. Student perspectives were examined regarding efficacy in classroom and leadership practices, deficits in advising and counseling, and needed support measures as expressed in individual survey responses.

The investigation of parent students' lived educational experiences was undertaken using a qualitative methodological perspective in order to understand the needs of single parent student mothers. Qualitative research methods allowed the researcher to find out how individuals who parent, absent partners, make conscious sense of and experience their world as students in the higher education setting (Creswell, 2013). Identified need and experience gathered from participant discourse offer a description of single parent student experience, utilizing contextual details to draw a clear picture of parent studenthood. Undertaking qualitative inquiry (Moustakas, 1994) enabled the researcher to study single parent studenthood.

### Qualitative Design

The qualitative research design is suitable for approaching the topic of single parent student experience because the researcher sought to gain a deeper understanding of educational experiences of parenting students in the higher educational setting through their own eyes. Also, the researcher explored not only what their lives were like as students but also how identities and roles as

parenting students intersected. This method of inquiry led to a greater understanding of parenting students' educational experiences and as well helped the researcher gain deeper insight into parenting while in the higher education school setting.

There is an underlying assumption in qualitative inquiry that the participants' experiences can be analyzed to reveal common themes and patterns. Further, that these themes offer deeper meanings of and shared significance to the experience under study (Moustakas, 1994; Schutz, 1970). The process of conducting qualitative research involved investigating educational experience as a single parent student mother through her discourse narratives, and ascribing and ascertaining meaning of these educational experiences through organizing relevant discourse into narratives and themes. By utilizing a qualitative paradigm of inquiry, the research was examined through the lens of a variety of theories, including social constructivist and feminist epistemologies, which contributed in developing diverse pathways to an interpretive framework (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

## Theoretical Framework

### Social Constructivism

Social constructivist theory asserts that human development occurs situated in social environments and that knowledge occurs as a collective (collaborative) social endeavor, or construction (McKinley, 2015). Qualitative

inquiry that relies on social constructivism concentrates on awareness of one's self as an individual through the experience of being a single parent situated in a higher education context. The experience of being both unpartnered parent concurrent with the experience of being student is examined through the interpretive lens of social constructivism to aid in understanding how student mothers' experiences develop and what needs present when immersed in the dominant culture of higher education institutions.

### Discourse Analysis

The role of researcher in a qualitative study is to elicit from participants the clearest possible expressions of their experiences. The researcher invokes detailed questions in order to reveal both dominant and resistance discourses through the process of qualitative inquiry. Researchers using qualitative research design are faced with two challenges: how to help participants express their world as directly as possible; and how to demonstrate these dimensions in a way that the lived world (the life world) is revealed.

Textually-oriented discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2014) is concerned with understanding how discursive practices are shaped and enacted. The intrinsic properties of social discourse --in this research study, textual discourse was revealed in survey answers—represents or constitutes a key element of their analysis (Fairclough, 2014). Thus both the “how,” and the “why,” of respondents' answers to survey questions becomes relevant if one is to truly understand participants' experiences. Dominant discourse occurs from a variety of sources,

(institutional, religious, instructional, social), acting to influence participants' identities, perceptions, and responses. Resistance discourse occurs in more subtle forms, present and identifiable through coding of emerging themes.

### Feminist Ontologies

Multiple disagreement exists in literature regarding definitive definitions of feminist theories, epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies. From positivist to post-modern, multiple facets and applications of feminist theory exist. However, any application grounded in feminist ontology (Stanley & Wise, 2002) is well-served in representing and embracing the theoretical and political importance of lived experience.

During evolutionary changes to feminist theory in relation to social positivism, Stanley and Wise (1993) posited that feminist research principles and practice should be concerned with seeking to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of female human experience, studying essential structures/strands of consciousness or experience.

Feminine poverty (Freeman, 2015; Threlfall 2015) is a feminist theory which holds that disproportionate numbers of women are poor, and that the burden of poverty is a consequence of inequity in income, deprivation of capabilities, and also a consequence of gender biases present in both society and government (Chant, 2006). The conceptual framework inclusive of feminist ontology served as an interpretive framework through which research objectives, findings, and relationships were triangulated. Feminist ontological assumptions

embrace the multiplicity of experiences present in student voices, including single parenthood concurrent with studenthood.

### Setting

Prior to 1960, the State of California was comprised of a group of educational institutions—universities and colleges—which competed with one another for student enrollment. In 1960, California adopted a Master Plan for Higher Education (CMPHE) in an attempt to accommodate baby boomers and anticipated enrollment jumps which would significantly impact education state wide. Simply, it was an effort to find a viable means of educating unprecedented numbers of college students and make higher education affordable.

Eventually, the California Master Plan of Higher Education developed into one of the largest and most distinguished systems of public education in the nation. The purpose of the MP was to coordinate and unify a hodgepodge of colleges and universities into one coherent system, institutions which previously competed with one another for enrollment. Each strata became part of a system in which institutions were assigned community college designation, comprehensive designation, or research university (or non-research university, still ranked above comprehensives).

Each strata targeted its own group of potential students and offered distinct educational benefits and formed unique mission statements, developed around its own particular set of responsibilities. The framework allowed for a



continuum of education to occur among California's students with differentiation of function for each contributing institution.

The salient feature of the CMPHE is that it combined, via a network of colleges and universities, excellence with access. A second hallmark of the plan is that it encouraged constructive competition and cooperation among institutions while allowing movement both between and within the system of education. A ten-fold increased rate of enrollment has taken place since its inception with increased numbers of campuses added each decade.

Understanding funding structures of California institutions of higher education and whether these can target disadvantaged, under-prepared, minority, and disabled and homeless students (called an equity funding factor) as well as providing accountability for the continuation of community and government resources—and their willingness to continue funding (Levin & Kater, 2013, p. 180) are important considerations in understanding internal and external funding barriers which impact single parent students. But pundits continue to define and ascribe relevance to the term *access*, and to set priorities with key stakeholders to “define the meaning of access” (Levin & Kater, 2013, p. 181).

Opening in 1906 with 35 students, one of California's most visible institutions of higher education, Lakewood University is a large comprehensive research-based university in southern California. Lakewood University has survived a 100 year span and has entered into a second century of growth and development (Cheatham et al., 2005, p. 196). Its continuing mission, “To Make

Man Whole,” and commitment to continue the teaching and healing ministry of Jesus Christ, to transforming lives through education, healthcare, and research and to shared values of compassion, integrity, and excellence has enabled the university to enter into a worldwide arena with hospitals, medical facilities, and affiliate health education institutions spanning the globe. Its disaster relief efforts and placement of medical personnel worldwide are a continuing testament to the drive and vision of both its students and its administrators. Yet not without monumental internal struggles with finance, access, affordability and distribution of resources have its notable achievements and mission been moved forward.

Lakewood University is in the process of transforming educational leadership whereby the needs of students from around the world can be met via professional and terminal degrees in health care professions and fields of study. Both research based and clinical based course offerings attract students globally, yet at basic levels, skills/academic literacy must continually be addressed, goals consistent with California’s Master Plan for higher education. Additionally, the move to online instruction poses unique challenges for both conventional and foreign students and courses must continually be redesigned to incorporate innovative and emerging instructional practices.

The newest expansion/development project for Lakewood University is occurring in San Bernardino via its Portal College Facility, targeting an underserved populace in urban and economically depressed San Bernardino a joint effort with the Lummi Nation Band of Indians, who recall fondly how

Lakewood physicians and nurses cared for members of the band when tribe members had little means and no one else in the community would provide medical care for the Indians. This longstanding relationship has enabled Lakewood Health to pair with the Lummi Indians in building a state of the art healthcare facility and educational complex in downtown San Bernardino, including a gourmet wait-service vegetarian restaurant that emphasizes a plant-based lifestyle of consumption, compatible with economic and sustainable living practices. The educational initiative will provide educational and career opportunities for six through twelve-month certificated programs in entry level medical certification courses, including phlebotomy, and medical and dental assisting programs (*Scope*, p. 2).

Students from ninety countries around the world attend Lakewood University. Sixty languages are spoken in the medical centre. Its School of Medicine has graduated more physicians than any other school of medicine in the United States. Ten thousand five hundred physicians have graduated since it opened in December 9, 1909. Lakewood University has been identified as one of the leading institutions in diversity in the United States.

### Approval

The research proposal was approved at California State University and Lakewood University for the study by the Internal Review Board in 2016 and 2017 (Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval, #15067), and

enabled administration of the survey requesting both general and specific information questions of subject participants consistent with Lakewood University's approval-granting research body.

### Recruitment

Lakewood University served as the source for study participants and recruitment. The survey was administered by school, with each individual school on campus sending out a link to the survey.

Students learned of the study via school wide emails. Willingness to participate was outlined in cover letters and was indicated by participant clicking on Qualtrics links provided in the cover letters. Once the links were accessed, participant consent was assumed, as indicated in cover emails, and willingness to participate was indicated by accessing and completing the survey via the links provided. Informed consent occurred when emails were opened, information regarding the study was disbursed, and participants elected to open the links provided and begin survey completion.

Each school across Lakewood University campus was contacted individually with a letter introducing the researcher and detailing project goals and Institutional Review Board approval. Contact information was provided and the survey instrument email letters to accompany email distribution were provided. The email letters included the Institutional Review Board approval number and a copy of the Institutional Review Board approval letter with the

surveys attached, with Informed Consent included as part of the email. The emails distributed campus wide included links to the Qualtrics survey online as well as supervising faculty and researcher contact information.

Participants followed online instructions to links provided. The survey was administered via Qualtrics through an independent IT professional and identifying participant information remained confidential. Participants followed directions for survey completion, which was estimated to be less than thirty minutes. The Qualtrics links to the surveys remained open for two weeks. Participants could access and complete the surveys during a two-week period. No monetary remuneration was given for participation in the surveys. The timeline for survey administration was Fall quarter 2017. The survey cover letters included in the email distribution disclosed the study purpose.

### Demographics

The instrument utilized in this study asked respondents to identify key pieces of personal information: age, program of study, presence of dependent children, and anticipated date of degree conferral, married or single, single parent student, female, head of household, with dependent children under age 18, enrolled in a higher education program of study.

My intent was to respect the rights, privacy, and autonomy of research participants to the fullest extent possible, and to utilize results to benefit single

parent students by raising awareness of unique issues and challenges faced by single parent students.

### Participants

The target populace was single parent students with dependent children, head of household, and female. Participants qualified for study participation when self-identifying as single parent, female, head of household, enrolled in program study, with dependent children under the age of eighteen. A sample representative of single parent student mothers present across campus was sought. Target sample size sought 12-18 participants. Twenty six respondents who self-identified as female and single parent students elected to participate in the completion of the survey. A sample size of twenty six respondents was achieved.

### Instrumentation

The survey instrument was administered via campus wide email utilizing a Qualtrics survey link contained within the email. The survey instrument assessed single parent mother student needs and forms of support they would find beneficial in degree-seeking programs. The survey instrument asked participants to report areas of deficit and to identify additional forms of support which would help them toward degree completion. Finally, single parent students were asked to report what additional forms of advising or support would be especially

relevant to them as single parent student mothers enrolled into degree-conferring programs.

### Validity/Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the soundness of the findings and strength of the researcher's argument. Creswell (2013) indicated that the aim of trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry is to support the argument that the inquiry's findings are worthwhile and institutionally relevant.

In this qualitative research study, validation and accuracy was sought via administration of confidential survey, and ensured credibility of the researcher's data and interpretations. The researcher provided opportunity in the survey to withdraw from participation prior to sending results, and to review answers prior to closing the survey link. Participants had opportunity to validate responses prior to final submission of responses.

Creswell (2013) advocates validation in studies as means of ascertaining whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences. Subjective, self-reported data presents limited validity. Yet respondents are uniquely qualified to comment on impediments to their success in higher educational endeavors, as well as internal or external attribution, which may confound or influence both dependent and independent variables. Additionally, shortcomings in instrumentation may present threats to validity, both internal and external, limiting researcher's ability to draw correct inferences from data

gathered, subject response, and population extrapolation.

The largest potential external threat to validity is the unique composition of both setting and organization. Other institutions of higher education in the state of California are not comparable in terms of religious affiliation, funding, mission vision, and program orientation.

### Triangulation

Qualitative research engages various methodologies and interpretive frameworks to aid in understanding human experience (Creswell, 2013). A transformative framework advocates that knowledge is not neutral but “reflects the power and social relationships within society” (p. 25-26). This research study sought to transform institutional understanding of the experiences of a precariat populace uniquely positioned within higher education and to reduce feminine poverty by raising awareness of the ways in which advising, admission, and support is distributed to single parent students. This study utilized qualitative research methodology to study the perceptions, experiences and needs of student single parents.

Feminist perspectives guided research in providing a lens through which issues problematic to women’s diverse situations as they attempted to engage in higher education processes could be examined. Constructivist, feminist and discourse theories guided in analyzing the results of this research. In working to empower single parent students to transcend constraints of both gender and



parenthood in higher education endeavors, knowledge which stems from human experience (Collins, 2010), was useful in recognizing communities in single parent student struggles (Oksala, 2016). Feminist epistemologies (Oksala, 2016) were invoked to address the needs and perspectives of single parent student mothers but additionally to transcend those experiences and expressed needs. Social constructivism maintains that human development is socially situated and knowledge is collaboratively constructed through interaction with others (McKinley, 2015). Additionally, groups served as examples of collaboratively constructed culture of shared meaning, which impacted them as student mothers. Finally, social reproductive theory was invoked to support emphasis on the structures and activities that transmit social inequality from one generation to the next (Doob, 2013).

Evidence presented explored various realities as pertains to single parent student experience (Creswell, 2013). The unit of analysis was single parent student need as expressed in responding to challenges encountered while engaged in higher educational endeavors. The source of data was single parent students. Assumptions in this study are that truth is present in student voices.

#### Confidentiality

Names were not collected nor recorded in research results and no identifying characteristics were registered into data results, thus protecting participant identity. Procedures for protecting participant confidentiality and

safeguarding the identities of study participants included coding and aggregate reporting. Research data was collected and stored electronically. Password protection was in place. Data was saved only to a secure storage location, LWU/LWUMC secured server or network. A portable device (laptop) was used for storage and retrieval. Data was saved only if (1) the device was encrypted, or (2) the storage was temporary, and (3) the portable device was in a physically secure location. Electronic research data was not transmitted via internet, email, or fax system applications, and was not transported (the carrying of a USB flashdrive, disk, CD, or removable hard drive that contained research data). Research data was not stored in hard copy format. No hard copy research data was transmitted or transported. Encryption prevented keeping of identifying data. Committee access to data occurred via portable device with safeguards as described above.

### Informed Consent

Informed consent is a process for obtaining permission before conducting research on a subject participant. Before enrolling a person into a study or project, a researcher may ask prospective participants to sign consent. Informed consent is collected according to guidelines from the fields of medical and research ethics. Informed consent was provided to research subjects based upon a clear appreciation and understanding of the facts, implications, and consequences of participation in the study. To give informed consent, the

individual concerned must have adequate reasoning faculties and be in possession of relevant facts.

Although informed consent has both legal and ethical implications, its purpose is primarily ethical in nature. As an ethical doctrine, informed consent is a process of communication whereby a research subject makes an informed and voluntary decision about accepting or declining to participate in a research study. In order to comply with legal aspects of research, informed consent should not be overlooked. It is critical for researchers to document consent processes as part of research and data collection.

In this study, subjects were provided informed consent via email administered by school. A cover letter was attached to the email identifying the Qualtrics link, on which participants could click to indicate their consent. The cover letter, attached to the student email, detailed both the study and its purpose, including contact information for investigator and faculty supervisor. Willingness to participate was outlined in the cover letter and was indicated by the participant clicking on the Qualtrics link provided in the cover letter. Once the link was accessed, participant consent was assumed, as indicated in the cover email, and willingness to participate was indicated by accessing and completing the survey via the link provided. Informed consent occurred when the email was opened, information regarding the study was disbursed, and participant indicated willingness to consent to serve as participant by opening the link provided and beginning survey completion.

## Bias

As sole researcher, biases are present. I acknowledge my biases might impact my interpretation of research findings. I made an effort in this study to set aside by biases, to maintain clinical objectivity, and to reflect only those results that the data bears. As a professor at Lakewood University, I have unique access to the student populace, which grants me entry to the research site. Ethical considerations included the potential for bias, as I am a single parent student, and identify sympathetically to research subjects.

My experiences as a sole provider single parent pursuing a post graduate degree color my views of males and institutional leaders as limiters who impede social, financial, and educational autonomy of women who support dependents without partner or governmental assistance. My background in a uniquely patriarchal, religious subculture causes me to distrust intrinsically male leadership and to ascribe to leadership negative roles in matriculation and attrition pertaining to women, and single mothers in particular. Institutions are heavily male in leadership, thus limiting access and justice for women in higher educational pursuits and leadership roles. Leaders may be viewed as gatekeepers of success, professionally, financially, and (with)holders of female academic and professional autonomy.

Finally, my experiences as a post graduate student single parent provider for dependents with special needs has incited my interest in helping raise

awareness for program leaders of the importance of identifying fragile or at-risk individuals who may be in need of additional financial, social, and emotional support resources in order to equalize access and participation in higher education for single mother students.

My intent was to respects the rights, privacy, and autonomy of research participants to the fullest extent possible. It is my hope results will benefit single parent students by raising awareness of unique issues and challenges faced by single parent students, and to incite program change and reallocation of resources to better benefit single parent students in their academic endeavors I continually attempted to answer the question, "What resources do these student mothers need to succeed to degree completion?"

#### Limitations/Delimitations

All research studies have potential delimitations. These are deliberate limitations to the study which were purposely imposed by the researcher. One of the delimitations of this study was geographical; all participants were from one county in Southern California. Additionally, participants were enrolled in programs of study at one private institution of higher education. Participants were all female, parents, absent partners, with minor children. Participants were included in the study, because they met the basic criteria.

Potential drawbacks of this study include findings that external and internal barriers to pursuit of college degrees may misrepresent or skew data

results. Limitations of this study are that it focused on one geographical institution and one state.

### Risks

This study did not involve children. Estimated magnitude of risk to adult participants was assumed to be minimal. Potential risks to the subjects related to the political, social, or economic context in which they live were minimal. Study participants held dual status (in addition to being research subjects, they were patients, employees, students, parents), risks that would be in addition to those experienced in their pre-existing role were minimal. Risks, though unlikely, were anticipated to potentially include anxiety, effort, and unknown risks. Participants were not asked for their names in the survey. Identifying information was not retained, if provided, and was discarded upon receipt.

### Benefits

Subjects did not benefit, but subsequent single parent students may benefit from enhanced program opportunities, resource distribution, and access to modified program and course structure for single parents. Utilizing study data allowed the researcher to piece together a comprehensive portrait of experience in order to create a rich-text description of the experience of single parent studenthood. Information gathered through the survey enabled the researcher to describe the lived educational experiences of parenting students and to better understand their complex scholastic support needs. This study brought to light

factors which may impact matriculation or attrition of single parent mothers in higher education. School officials and the community of scholars will benefit from improved leadership and curricular practices which, in turn, can lead to improved program completion rates for single parent student mothers by identifying and addressing the range of unique needs which present for unpartnered women parent students.

Expected benefits to humanity included single parents potentially becoming more visible to stakeholders in higher education. Recognition of unique needs for support during studies in higher education may become identified, recognized, and formalized in terms of support structures, policies, and resource distribution. Benefits to study participants are potentially raised awareness of financial, institutional, and structural considerations for single parent mothers in undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate endeavors. Potential re-allocation of institutional resources could better support single parent student mothers at all levels of scholastic enterprise.

### Data Analysis

In the general process of qualitative data analysis, the researcher compiles data into clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). The researcher then links the clusters of meaning to each other to create a general textual and structural description of the experiences (Creswell, 2013). The researcher

organized self-described need into themes and how single parenthood was experienced by each participant.

The data analysis was ongoing through the study and the researcher also used structural coherences in the form of variations of similar questions to triangulate the study. This helped the researcher to ensure the interpretation of the data was an accurate account of the participants' needs.

A survey was administered to purposefully select a particular student populace of Lakewood University students. Data provided by participants in completion of the survey instrument utilized fifteen questions to assess needs of single parent students. Reports identified areas of deficit for single parent students in higher education endeavors. The qualitative profile allowed for respondents to articulate identified areas of deficit in classroom practice, instruction, advising, and program support in assisting them to degree completion. Responses identified key areas of support needed from the perspective of participants.

Data collected from student surveys allowed respondents to pass advice on to future single parent student mothers and to allow them to benefit from information garnered from others who had pursued degrees as single parents before them. Open-ended survey questions enabled sharing of experience and wisdom to future generations of single parent student mothers.

Methodology for this study used qualitative data derived from closed and open-ended survey questions administered to Lakewood University students to



obtain a profile of how single parent students fare in higher educational endeavors at Lakewood University. The study addressed single parents in higher education utilizing explanatory qualitative methods design and involved collecting survey data from single parent female students. The survey explored single parent student access, matriculation, and perception of success in higher education endeavors at Lakewood University.

The survey instrument administered closed-ended questions pertaining to respondents' experiences as a single parent student, and open ended questions asking respondents to identify specific unmet needs or additional sources of support, which they felt would be valuable to their success in degree attainment. Participants were asked to rank their perceptions of their academic success and to identify both internal and external attributes which they felt contributed to their success. Finally, participants were asked to identify unmet needs as a single parent student and to articulate additional help which they would find beneficial from their institution in supporting their degree attainment. The last question on the survey was open-ended and requested the respondents share with other single parent student mothers advice or experiences they feel would benefit other single parent student mothers to know as they began their degree-seeking programs.

### Themes

After student surveys were complete, student responses and areas of

common shared experience and need were noted. As student survey data was analyzed, Creswell's (2007) qualitative research framework served to guide in grouping of concepts and identifying emerging themes. Commonly expressed needs were categorized or arranged into participant description of experience. It was the intent of this study to focus on three key areas related to the reduction of attrition for single parent student mothers in higher education: improve understanding of the needs and experiences of the precariat subset group of single parent student mothers, elucidate attribution of success and failure, and identify additional forms of support that would be most beneficial in advancing single parent student mothers to degree completion.

A number of factors must be considered in understanding how the praxis of identity and achievement interact via the intersectionality of the educational experience to impact educational outcomes, both for parent student mothers and, ultimately, dependent children whose mothers are engaged in higher educational endeavors. Constructivist, feminist, and discourse theories guided in illuminating and interpreting consequences of the discourses, both dominant and resistant, studied. The intent of this study was to empower human beings, specifically single parents, to transcend constraints placed on them by gender, class, matriarchal single parenthood, and to enter into decision-making and reformulation of social identities which enable them to contribute productively to the collaborative formation of society through poverty-reducing degree completion endeavors. I sought to improve policy and practice, which might

better facilitate degree completion for single parent student mothers in higher education.

### Discourse Analysis

In this study, the researcher paid attention to various forms and types of discourses that shaped participants' needs and experiences, as discourses, both dominant and resistant, shape human thought (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008). Discursive practices (Oksala, 2016) were examined to aid in understanding identity and identity perception in relation to worldview. Discourse theory was utilized to understand the process of talk and interaction between people and the products of that interaction (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008).

Language is, at its core, social interaction, often termed "social practice" (Fairclough, 1995). What is of interest to researchers, are the social contexts in which communication is occurring. Gee (1999) identified any semiotic event as useful in understanding naturally occurring language use. Objects of discourse analysis, broader than spoken discourse, can include written communication of individuals, and researchers may seek to analyze communication occurring beyond the boundaries of the sentence itself. Global structures of communication are of special interest in this research study, as the researcher sought to understand and schematically organize resultant discourse and needs into themed groups. The emergence of persistent topics—or "needs," provides a relevant or salient feature of the discourse by which need groups can be

established. In this context, written content of single parent student mothers' experiences served as socio-literary examples of discourse or "social practice" (Foucault, 1972; Oksala, 2016), disseminated through dominant influence of institutional context (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008). Notions of societal power relationships (such as teacher-student, or student-administrator) served as relevant frameworks through which need was both identified and expressed. The types of needs identified and the ways in which these needs were expressed helped reveal insights into how issues of inequality, power, or dominance influenced both identification and expression of need.

### Summary

Chapter 3 discussed the qualitative research design and its process. In this study, the researcher described qualitative inquiry, constructivist, feminist, and discourse analysis theories, and their applications in framing and understanding needs as expressed in the research study by single parent student mothers (Seidman, 1998). Qualitative inquiry is an essential and valuable tool, because the interest of educational researchers is to find out how people's experiences influence educational outcomes.

The chapter provided the reader with the foundations and framework of the study. Also the reader was provided with information about the scope of the study, the role of the researcher, setting of the research study, where and how the study was conducted, how participants were recruited for participation in the

study, and requirements for inclusion. Other areas include instrument used for data collection, cover letters which accompanied study instrument, data analysis, and limitations of the study. This qualitative study explored the educational needs and experiences of parenting students in higher education which has the potential to give participants a voice, challenge educational and political discourses, and alter educational policies and practices. The survey collected qualitative data to enable administrators and program heads to better understand the unique needs of the single parent student populace, and to potentially utilize results to expand program services and offerings.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS AND RESULTS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the results from the qualitative study and engages analysis of discursive narratives from the perspective of student parent mothers based on data collected in the study. The purpose of this qualitative analysis was to explore and describe the lived educational experiences of the participants, and specifically, to identify the unique needs and challenges faced by single parent student mothers at all levels of scholastic enterprise.

Discourse analysis was used as an interpretive device to situate the written discourse of parent student mothers within their identities as single parents, and as students (Gee, 2005). Identity confers different ways of participating in different social groups and identity can be influenced by both culture and institution (Gee, 2005). In analyzing the impact of global capitalism on the discourse narratives of student mothers, it is possible to view two potentially discreet groups or “cultures,” (Gee, 2005, p. 138) --faculty and students, and institution and student, --and to observe the affiliation or loss thereof, that is both the product and cause of discursive disjuncture. It was not the intent of this researcher to set up a binary contrast between groups, but rather, to understand communication and the co-construction of socioculturally situated identities as interaction between institution and student. For example,

“good student,” and “good parent,” both emerged as valid and pressing social identities for single parent students.

Linguistic analysis sought to consider categories of discourse that both connect students in fashioning identities that attach them to their “everyday” (Gee, 2005, p. 141) social and dialogic interactions, as well as concurrently co-forming identities in “achievement spaces” (p. 141) that reflect and defer to powerful institutional and cultural norms which shape identity and academic outcome. How social and cultural perspectives, needs, and identities of single parent student mothers were enacted and altered within the context of their experiences as students, and as parents, while pursuing degrees in higher education, was viewed through a lens of thematic analysis, with special attention given to the emergence of themes as cultural systems comprising sets of interrelated themes. The importance of any theme, (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) is related to (1) how often it appears, (2) how pervasive it is across different types of cultural ideas and practices, (3) how people react when the theme is violated, and (4) the degree to which the number, force, and variety of a theme’s expression is controlled by specific contexts. Key words and phrases in written narratives were analyzed in relation to themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) about student parenthood --forced choice, guilt, need, pressure, deficit, and forced choice cost,-- as well as triangulated with identities as single parents and as emerging healthcare professionals. Repetition was analyzed to identify themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Word lists and KWIC (key word in context) techniques

were invoked to compile thematic correlation. Theoretical underpinning for analysis was predicated upon the researcher seeking to understand what student parents were talking about by examination of student parent discourse (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

In viewing language as both action and affiliation (Gee, 2005), the researcher sought to understand, via the language presented in respondents' words, how identities as single parents, identities as students, and identities as mothers were supported by institutional response, and how institutional culture underscored or eroded their identities as mothers and their identities as students. In order to protect and maintain confidentiality, no identifying information was sought, nor any identifying information retained in study results. Each participant's experiences and needs as a single parent student that emerged during her course of study are represented to the extent possible in survey methodology. In order to provide meaning and locate the narratives and needs within the context of their lived educational experiences, direct and detailed descriptions provided in respondents' own words are included in study results. Furthermore, respondents had the opportunity at the close of the survey to review their responses and to clarify their answers for accuracy before results were submitted. Finally, respondents' descriptions of need and experience are given in their own voices.

The chapter is based on data collected from the survey questionnaire and it is organized into four sections. In the first section, demographic data is



presented in order to create a profile of students surveyed. In the second section, data is presented obtained on tax status, levels of support, the presence or absence of additional financial support, and whether or not participants work—and how much. In the third section, participant responses are presented to queries regarding advising, and forms of on-campus support that would be relevant to them as student parents. In the closing section of the chapter, needs are detailed, as well as advice for future single parent student mothers, which respondents felt would be beneficial for subsequent single parent student mothers to know when entering degree-conferring programs. At the close of the chapter, themes that emerged, particularly as pertains to patterns of support relevant to single parent student mothers are identified. The chapter closes with a summary of need and pattern of support most relevant to advancing single parent student mothers to degree completion.

### Educational Experiences of Participants

Data taken from the participants' discourse narratives is presented in the following sections of chapter four. The purpose of this study was to represent needs and experiences of student mothers regarding their educational experiences in their school setting. Data details stories, experience, and need from the participants regarding their lived educational experiences.

Twenty-six respondents who were single parent students enrolled at Lakewood University in degree-conferring programs responded to the survey. As

noted in earlier chapters, women face unique barriers and gender bias in both employment and education. Therefore, male single parent students were omitted from consideration in this study. Twenty-six respondents qualified to participate in the study as evaluable single parent females.

Seventy-five percent the student mothers were enrolled in Bachelor's degree or certificated programs. Ten percent were enrolled in a Masters degree program. Sixteen percent of respondents were enrolled in doctoral degree-conferring programs of study.

### Demographics

In the opening section of the research data, information detailing the demographics of participants was taken in order for them to self-identify as single parent students enrolled in degree-conferring programs, and female. The next question asked respondents to identify if they qualified as head of household. Twelve (60%) of the participants self-identified as head of household. Nineteen of the respondents work while attending school, while seven did not work outside their homes, and eight (10%) of the 26 respondents did not receive financial aid. See Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Head of Household

Are you head of household? Do you work? Do you receive financial aid?

Head of household N=26	Number of respondents	Work	Receive financial aid
No	14	7	8
Yes	12	19	18

The next section of data collected established students in their respective degree programs. This data is useful in helping analyze perceptions of success for student mothers and where needed support could augment their performance and completion of degrees.

#### Success Attribution

The next section of data collected, sought to ascertain where student mothers ranked themselves in terms of their educational standing in their institution. Respondents were asked to rank their perceptions of their academic success.

Table 4.2 Self Perceptions of Academic Success

Please rank your perception of your academic success level.

	%	N
Very successful	50%	9
Moderately successful	44.44%	8
Success is a challenge	5.56%	1
Total	100%	18

In this section of the survey, respondents were asked to rank their perceptions of their academic success. Nine respondents (50%) defined themselves as “very successful,” representing just over half of respondents. This suggests that confidence and academic ability figured prominently into the experiences of these individuals, while an additional eight (44.44%) ranked themselves as “moderately successful.” The final one (5.56%) found becoming successful “a challenge.” Overall, student mothers appear to view themselves largely positively in terms of achievement and educational outcomes. The next question asked them to assess why.

Next, the student mothers were asked to what they attributed their success. See Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Success Attribution

If you answered very successful or moderately successful, in the preceding questions, to what do you attribute your success?

Success Attribution	%	N
My own effort	94.44%	17
Support from my school	5.56%	1
	100%	18

In the follow-up question, multiple responses were allowed to be selected by each participant. Ninety four percent of respondents felt their academic success was attributable to their own efforts (hard work, determination and perseverance), when specified in comparison to success as a result of support or intervention offered by their school. One respondent felt that the school supported her to her current level of academic success.

#### Support

For purposes of this study, support is assumed to be monies needed to meet the educational, healthcare, and living expenses for dependent children until the age of eighteen. The researcher sought to understand single parent whether or not the school was advising single parent student mothers of relevant forms of support available for them while studying and parenting dependent children.

For support offered, all students reported that no services or additional forms of support relevant to them as parenting students had been offered by their institution. The question regarding advising attempted to ascertain whether additional forms of support custom tailored to the needs of single parent student mothers was being communicated by either faculty or administrators. As with the previous question, none of the respondents reported communication of advising relevant to them as parenting students, which represented the most significant deficit in terms of supporting single parent student mothers to degree completion. Both the absence of tailored support services, as well as failure to communicate any potentially relevant services resulted in single parent student mothers feeling that they needed to carve or create their own pathway to success, and corresponded to the views expressed in the data in crediting their academic standing as attributable to their own efforts, rather than to support received from their institution.

These data revealed an institutional deficit in identifying single parent student needs, tailoring forms of support commensurate with that need, and communicating available forms of support relevant to student parents in appropriate forms. This finding highlighted absence of attention to planning, marketing, and budgeting at the administrative level for the unique needs of single parent students in higher education.

### Workload

Regarding workloads commensurate with pursuit of higher educational degrees, 11 respondents worked 10-20 hours per week, while 7 worked 20-40 hours per week. As workloads impact success at all levels of scholastic enterprise, the presence or absence of support can impact a single parent student mother's workload significantly; absence of adequate financial aid or support from co-parents can result in necessity of full-time external employment, and time demands of jobs can compete with time demands needed to parent and perform as students.

Table 4.4 Workload While Attending School

While attending school, how many hours per week do you work?

Work load level	%	N
0-10 hours	5.54%	1
10-20 hours	42.30%	11
20-40 hours	26.92%	7
Total	73%	19

### Financial Aid

The next section of the survey requested that respondents identify whether or not they receive financial aid, and from what sources they received aid. Financial aid is an important consideration in understanding how, or in what

ways, student mothers perceive themselves to be impacted by student debt. See Table 4.5.

Table 4.5 Financial Aid Status

What forms of financial aid do you receive?

	(Multiple forms of aid possible for each respondent %	N
Federal	58%	15
State	27%	7
Loans	58%	15
Pell	12%	3
Cohort	12%	3
Military	8%	2

While previous sections of the research study addressed external sources of support, this area of the study called out the presence of financial aid. Ninety percent of respondents acknowledged receiving financial aid while 10% did not. Student aid varied from Stafford loans, which are student loans offered by the government to eligible students enrolled in accredited American institutions of higher education to help finance their education, to Pell Grants which are subsidies the U.S. federal government provides for students who need it to pay for college. Federal Pell Grants are limited to students with financial need, who have not earned their first bachelors degree, or who are enrolled in certain post-



baccalaureate programs, through participating institutions. In addition, tuition benefits make it possible for employers to provide their employees' children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews with a guaranteed college scholarship. Finally, scholarships -- a grant or payment made by the institution to support a student's education, awarded on the basis of academic or other achievement, and tuition monies awarded to a student on the basis of ethnicity, represent significant contributions to meeting the financial needs of student mothers.

### Student Debt Concerns

When asked about unmet needs as a student mother, 100% of respondents self-identified as concerned about student debt. In the qualitative portion of the responses, ways in which debt concern may be different from non-parenting students is detailed. Ability to repay student loans may be constrained by having to support dependents following graduation. At the center of concern about debt was ability to support children while repaying loans. Student mothers expressed reservations regarding ability to provide support for dependents at basic levels, while repaying student debt. Specific concerns regarding the presence of student debt following graduation were articulated:

I am concerned about being able to pay back my student loans. Once I am done, the amount of my loans will be enormous. I am worried that my monthly payment will be so high when I am done that I will still be struggling to make ends meet. How will I be able to afford it all and still be able to get a nice home? Will I be able to pay off all the debt and still be able to take care of my children? (November, 2017)

I am really worried I won't have enough money to send my child to college. I don't want to have my going to college cause them not to be able to get college educated. Also, as a single mom, I worry about just getting a

partner or husband who can help. But what if he turns out to be unsuitable or makes our lives worse, instead of helping us, just so I can get financial help from another adult? I wish the school had aid available to single moms so we wouldn't have to go deeply into debt which could take us the rest of our lives to pay off, or cause our kids to miss out on college because we can't afford to send them. (November, 2017)

I am concerned about being able to afford paying back my student loans. (November, 2017)

I am concerned that someday I may have to marry a sub-par quality man to have the presence of another income. This may place my children and myself in danger due to the risks of a non-related adult being present in our home. I worry that he could abuse my children, or become abusive towards me. The kind of person I would like to marry is generally not interested in single mothers with children in tow. (November, 2017)

While some of the financial aid will not need to be repaid, a lot of it will. I am wondering if I will be able to make my payments and still have any quality of life for myself and my kids. (November, 2017)

Loans will be high. I worry that payments will be too high to make my degree worth getting. (November, 2017)

Inability to pay back quickly, continued impact on quality of life for my family. (November, 2017)

I am concerned about paying for my daughter's education and other activities . I am worried that I may not be able to get a good enough job quickly enough to pay back the loans. I came to school to better my situation but the amount of money that it is taking is extremely scary. It is nerve wracking looking at the cost per month of loan repayments and wondering if my income after school will actually be able to cover everything. I have had to reconsider schooling because of the cost, weighing the pros and cons and hoping in the end that the pros end up outweighing the cons. (November, 2017)

What will I be paying once out of school? Will I be able to afford it? (November, 2017)

I am worried that I might have to settle for a partner that is not the quality I would like for myself or for my children. I also worry that I will have to choose between educating myself and educating my children someday, because if I can't manage my debt, I won't be able to afford to save for

them to attend college. I would like for myself and for my kids to go to college. But it may end up being them, or me. (November, 2017)

I am now in a bachelor's program. I have had my respiratory license for two years now. I have been unable to find a job. My fear is that I will not be able to keep my license current and pay my loans back if I cannot find a job. I think sometimes there should be a program to help find position and jobs for students, especially those with children, who don't have a husband or partner. (November, 2017)

I am concerned about the size of my payments when I am done. I am worried about my inability to pay back my loans quickly and how this will have a continued impact on my quality of life for my family. (November, 2017)

If my job will pay enough to make the payments without stressing my family. I also worry about the impact borrowing so much will have on my credit, which may cause trouble when I try to purchase a home for my kids and myself to live in. (November, 2017)

I worry every day that going to school myself might result in my not being able to afford to save for my kids to go to college. (November, 2017)

How to pay it off. (November, 2017)

I am concerned that my ... job may not pay enough so that I can afford to make my payments and support my family. (November, 2017)

I am worried payments will be too high for me to make, and somewhere we will have to sacrifice quality of living to keep up with the payments. I worry about getting so far in debt my education will not have been worth it. (November, 2017)

For now, I am worried about the amount I will owe and what will happen when I complete this bachelor's program, because I plan to attend graduate school, which is another couple thousand dollars. But for now, I am trying to focus on earning good grades. (November, 2017)

Debt concern can play a large role in parenting students' choice to pursue higher education or not. Forcing a parent to choose between advancing themselves educationally and professionally, while incurring large amounts of debt, or

remaining at sub-par levels of pay and education in order to avoid unmanageable debt, places unfair and inequitable choice constraints on parenting student mothers. In addition, having to choose between educating themselves, and education their children can result in perpetuation of the cycle of feminine poverty and poor educational outcomes for dependents of single mothers.

### Forced Choice

Of all the questions in the survey, the next one provided the most troubling context for academic success of single parent student mothers, leading to questions regarding why and in what ways lack of support tailored to their status as single parents impacted the academic experiences of parenting mothers. In addition to forced choice costs regarding debt and education, other kinds of forced choice situations present to parenting students. For example, detailed in the respondents' words are themes of worry, guilt, and uncertainty, and competing roles of good parent versus good student. Costs of missing important moments in their children's lives as well as compromising academic performance haunted these single parent student mothers:

I have missed my kids' school performances, shown up late to their school events, had to miss class, which causes the instructor to look at me as though I am failing to perform as a student. (November, 2017)

Many times I have had to miss class because my child is sick or has a medical appointment. I also miss out on being there for field trips, getting to volunteer at school, help my child participate or take them to a school program or activity. I end up feeling like a loser parent, --and a poor quality bottom rung student. (November, 2017)

I was unable attend some events that my child participated in at school. (November, 2017)

Leaving child home alone at age 12 and potentially jeopardizing custody, when he was ill. Having to beg and plead with family to watch him during school breaks. Holiday breaks don't match mine. Also, my grades suffer when I cannot attend class on time or at all. Sleep deprivation is a big deal, when school is done and I get home it's time to be mommy until I can get my child to bed. Then I am able to finally start studying. (November, 2017)

Choosing to study instead of choosing to help my children resulted in the most embarrassing call of my life. my daughter's teacher called to say she hadn't turned in homework for two weeks. It's really hard to describe a cost. The time I miss with my daughter doesn't have a price. They are moments and experiences that I will miss and never be able to get back. I just try to move forward and remember that there will be more and that I am working towards bettering my daughter's life. I am lucky enough too in a way that I don't have to stress too much because my family is usually able to help. However there are times when being able to afford actual child care would be beneficial. But the costs are so high that they are just unreasonable for a single parent to afford, while still providing all the other necessities that are needed. It is emotionally stressful and I have an increased perception of failing my child. (November, 2017)

Childcare costs \$50 per day, per child (I have three children). Purchasing their necessitates, such as clothes, shoes, school supplies, electronics, diapers, formula, et cetera and home necessities such as soap, shampoo and conditioner, toothpaste, toilet paper, laundry detergent, et cetera. Fuel, oil changes, and other vehicle costs. Rent utilities, food. All of these have to be chosen between and I have to determine which we can do without at certain times. (November, 2017)

Sometimes I have to let my child down, mostly if it its an important topic or close to exam time. My child does not understand it now, but hopefully they will understand my sacrifices later. (November, 2017)

I've missed awards ceremonies, because of quizzes and fear of falling behind in a lecture. I have also had to arrange babysitters whom I can't fully afford right now. I have also had to bring my child to lecture or class. That is embarrassing and I think the professor thinks less of me as a student. (November, 2017)

I feel a lot of stress like I am not being a good parent, when I take time to study or complete my assignments or attend classes instead of devoting all my time and energy and focus to my kids. I miss out on many of their school activities and field trips. When i do take time to participate in school stuff, then I feel like the professors are looking at me as though I am a slacker and poor student who is underperforming when I come late, or haven't completed an assignment, or have to miss class. I also can't participate in study groups. This costs me in my grades. (November, 2017)

Many times I have to attend class instead of going to my children's activities. This makes me feel guilty for missing out on their stuff. But when I miss class, then I feel the professors don't think I am taking my education seriously. (November, 2017)

I miss a lot of my kids' events at school. Sometimes I have to miss class to take them to the doctor or when they have half days and I don't have anyone to pick them up. (November, 2017)

I sometimes miss out on putting my kids to bed because I am in class late. Often I am unable to participate in study groups which would help my grades . Sometimes I have to miss class because my kids are sick or have a doctor's appointment. (November, 2017)

Competing identities of effective parent versus effective student can cause internal forms of conflict, which may undermine a student's sense of identity and pride in their accomplishments as a parent or student. Furthermore, forced choices between two roles deemed of equal importance can add to the many burdens multiple role demands make of parenting student mothers. Identities became more fluid as parent students are forced to choose between obligations to family, and obligations to self, and obligations to jobs in terms of furthering themselves professionally and personally or improving their performance as parents or employees.

This area of data, more than any other, speaks to the forced choices single parent student mothers are faced with, and the potential to undermine their and their dependents' quality of life and future educational outcomes and economic security. Conflicting and multiple roles and competing expectations—both internal and external—act to undermine a student parent's time and attention to academic pursuits. Earnings and support are impacted by academic performance, if classes have to be missed due to sick children. Missing key events in their child's lives can result in guilt, anxiety, and stress, as well as precaritising custodial positioning. Academic standing for parent student mothers also suffers, and loss of merit-based aid upon which single mothers may be dependent can be further detrimental to parent students supporting dependents. Parenting while enrolled as a student in a degree-conferring program places enormous strain on the roles student parents must move between in order to feel successful as both parents and students.

In attempting to take on or enact disparate social identities concurrently, respondents encountered a conflicting identity effect: their identities in relation to certain groups (that is, students without children, mothers, teachers, employers) were resulting in behaviors that may be rejected on the basis of perceived group status differences, the perceived legitimacy and stability of those status differences, and perceived ability to move from one group to another without penalty. Study participants indicated they felt enormous emotional pressure in their multiplicity of roles:

I have never gotten the chance to be that "star" student, because of attendance, issues with childcare, having to not turn in a top quality paper because I had to fulfill responsibilities at work or to my kids instead. It's always a choice, and somebody always loses. (November, 2017)

I have felt I have been a very poor quality parent as a result of my decision to participate in a doctoral program. The stress and strain on my already meager resources has been enormous and I haven't felt the instructors cared that I work and am raising a family at all. (November, 2017)

I feel guilty for missing out on school activities, study groups, fun stuff for students that I have to be a parent during. Then when I focus intensely on school, I feel like I am being a bad parent to my kids because they miss me. I am the only parent so I can't really afford to be checked out for their childhoods. (November, 2017)

It hasn't affected my identity because I'm proud of being a mother. But, I have not been able to participate in school activities due to work, study, and need for me to spend time with my children. Being a mother and student has made me look like I am not able to balance everything and get good grades. It is hard for single parent students to get good grades because we have other things to do besides studying. (November, 2017)

I did not participate in study groups with the other students in my cohort as I needed to attend to my adult responsibilities outside of mandatory class/clinical times. I often felt like an "outsider" and did not attend my pinning because by the time school was finished, I wanted nothing further to do with any further nursing school activities. I was completely burned out. (November, 2017)

There are times when I cannot participate in social activities on campus because I have children that need to be take care of. This makes me feel isolated from other students who are not parenting. I am also usually preoccupied with thinking of my child's well being. It's hard to focus sometimes because I have so much on my mind. To my teachers, I think I come across as irresponsible or unreliable. Sometimes I come to class late (more than other students) or do not come at all. I procrastinate, feel overwhelmed, and sometimes cannot keep up with the workload. (November, 2017)

I am proud of being a mother. Everyone knows I am a mom. :) I feel that I have someone to work that much harder for. It is hard to juggle work with school and being a mom, but I want to show her that with hard work, anything is possible. (November, 2017)



I feel like other students have it easier and I wish I would have attended college first, before I had children. There doesn't seem to be many single mothers attending college. It makes me feel like an outcast. I sometimes feel embarrassed being a single mother in college... like I don't fit in. (November, 2017)

I feel more focused while I am at school. But I feel detached from the student life experience. Sometimes I have trouble identifying with the majority of other students in my classes because they don't have kids and parent pressures. It is a constant balancing act to make sure my daughter doesn't sacrifice and lose out because I choose to go to school. I feel alone because students in my program are much younger and they don't have kids. (November, 2017)

My experience as a single parent has affected me through out my children's lives and even more so as a parent now. I try to get everything done as soon as possible instead of studying in a group, where if I miss something the group would help fill in those gaps. Being a young parent has affected my confidence. I love my children but it's difficult to be this young and have kids who look like my siblings. I feel like other students have it easier and I wish I would have attended college first before I had children. There don't seem to be many single mothers attending college. It makes me feel like an outcast. I sometime feel embarrassed being a single mom and I don't feel like I fit in with the other students. Then I don't feel like I am being the best parent when I have to study, attend class, or work. My kids miss out on a mom dedicated to caring for them and meeting their needs instead of my own. It makes me feel selfish and pulled in all directions. (November, 2017)

I feel as though I have to succeed for my son. There is more pressure to get it right the first time as he can't afford for me to mess up or need second chances. (November, 2017)

The identity of me as a single mother student is completely different than that of student right out of high school, or even a younger single student. At the core of my identity is financial burden, time restraints, lack of sleep, but also it's responsibility, maturity, pure and real love and joy. As a single mother student, I have a deeper purpose and meaning, so each assignment, each exam, each clinical rotation means everything to me, because it means everything to my children's futures. I don't allow myself to be lazy, to be late, or to skip something because I was tired or sick, which actually created the best possible outcome, I excelled in my role as a nursing student and in my training. (November, 2017)

It has sometimes made it difficult to study with other classmates. Some seem to think that because I have a child that it would in some way interfere with studying. Sometimes it does, but I would never allow it to interfere with others studying. I missed a study group because I couldn't find a sitter and since then it has been hard to find others to study with. I also feel that others feel that I don't work as hard or I won't be successful because of the fact that I have a child. (November, 2017)

It's hard to identify with my peers. I live in another world and have different responsibilities. Being a single parent is the hardest thing I ever had to do. When my ex-husband left I had six kids to take care of. It has been a definite struggle. My identity is not a student. No matter how hard I try I will always be a mother first. My kids are my identity. That is why I would love to find a job, so that I can be the person I want to be, the person that I have studied to be, and the practitioner that patients deserve to have. I want to find a job so that I can have some stability within my life and find the identity that I am meant to have. (November, 2017)

I often feel guilty and like I am not doing a very good job at either being both parents to my kids or doing a good job at school. I want to be an outstanding student but then if I study hard my kids get upset about the time my assignments take away from them. (November, 2017)

I feel pulled two directions. I want to be a good parent as I am the only parent. But part of being a good parent is providing well for and taking care of my family. In order to do that I have got to get this degree finished so I can get a better job and take better care of all of us. (November, 2017)

Embedded in the respondent's narratives were relationship categories that portrayed the enactment of power relationships between student and teacher which built and maintained existing relationship disparities and conflict with attempts to build situationally-located identities as both "good parent," and "competent student" between the mother and her peers and the mother and her teachers. Additionally, a single mother's attempts to move herself through her

designated achievement space were met with resistance to detaching from lifeworld duties, roles, and responsibilities. Although mitigating dialectical markers were acknowledged, (“sensitivity,” and “consideration”), situated meanings implied a continued power and political disparity between discourse narratives, and an unrelenting of the disparate relationships.

### Need

The last section of the survey asked student parent mothers to specify unmet needs on their journeys as students seeking degrees with which they felt their institution could better support them as parenting students. The results for this section indicated a strong need for counseling services, at times and frequency that would be compatible with parenting students’ schedules and needs. The strain and insufficiency of resources for parenting student mothers can be enormous and can negatively impact outcomes at all levels of scholastic enterprise. Though counseling is available on most college campuses, it is typically offered at times when parenting students must study, work, attend classes, or parent. Existing counseling services may not be sufficiently tailored to meet the existing need of parenting students. Additionally, due to role strain, parent students may benefit from increased numbers of sessions, rather than the standard limit on counseling imposed on traditional student populaces. Finally, childcare needs emerged as a pressing unmet need for single parent student mothers.

Expressed need in the words of single parent student mothers crossed a variety of spectrums. The following responses underscored the role institutions can play in supporting single parent student mothers:

More flexible schedules for classes that coincide with daycare times and hours. Cheaper housing for me and my kids. I need financial help not in the form of loans. Just straight financial assistance. I wish they had jobs on campus or near campus for single moms that pay better and take into consideration that I have responsibilities to kids. (November, 2017)

Better housing and daycare for my kids that I can afford and classes at times when I can use the daycare. I could use a supportive teacher who understands when I have sick kids or work responsibilities and can't lose my job so must sacrifice attendance at class or a paper that is due needs to be turned in later than everyone. (November, 2017)

My computer at home is old and is missing some things on it I need for school. My rent is too high and I have a long drive to school. Often daycare ends before I can get out of class. I also need financial help with living expenses. (November, 2017)

Housing, help with hard subjects such as tutor, support group for single moms, longer time to complete my degree, help with housing close to school and daycare. (November, 2017)

Support groups for single parents. (November, 2017)

I think better housing and childcare are my biggest needs. Also, financial help. Childcare in evenings, more counseling services. I need housing that fits my family and my budget. (November, 2017)

More flexible schedule, attendance policy that accommodates parents with occasionally sick kids, understanding professors who are willing to help me succeed and recognize that I am a parent. (November, 2017)

I feel that help with housing that is affordable is my biggest need. I want my kids to have access to daycare without a long drive, and for me to be able to get to my classes quickly and easily. But housing close to school isn't suitable for families or isn't kid-friendly. (November, 2017)

Financial and childcare needs are my most pressing needs. The biggest need is housing. I live over an hour away (two hours with traffic) and there are no housing options for me here. I also need more quiet time and space at the school to study. More printing. More one on one tutoring. (November, 2017)

I am in need of reasonable child care services. (November, 2017)

I need housing that is affordable and close to campus so I can drop off and pick up my kids at hours that correspond to my classes. Many times the daycare closes before I can get my kids, so I have to miss parts of class or try and get someone else to pick them up. It is really stressful to have housing be so expensive here, and I wish the school could provide affordable housing for single moms, with reduced day care rates, and uncapped counseling, because we have a lot of stress, and family stress in particular. It would be great if they could supply us with working computers/laptops, and with some form of financial assistance that wouldn't result in catastrophic debt. (November, 2017)

Lack of time to complete homework and sleep. Flexibility in daycare and classes so I can be a parent and a student and have some medium of success in both. I have really needed flexibility regarding scheduling conflicts of extracurricular activities, meetings, lectures, et cetera. Childcare is always a problem. There are times, such as minimum day, that tend to make it hard for me to come to class because there is not always someone who can pick up my child. I cannot afford actual childcare because today's prices are extremely high, so I have to rely on my family to help with my child. So there are times when I cannot attend class because there is no one who can help that day with my child and childcare programs are too expensive for me. (November, 2017)

I need before school/after school childcare. I also need housing close to school. I need some help with time management so I can fit my studying in, work, and be able to complete my assignments and be successful as a student. (November, 2017)

I have needed evening childcare. My classes are at night and because of a medical condition in one of my children, I have been unable to get anyone to watch her. When I am gone to classes, my kids cry because I am not there to tuck them in, fight, or no homework gets done, lots of tv gets watched, and they go to bed late. Also, I need financial assistance, but because I work, I don't qualify for any. (November, 2017)

I have various types of needs, for now the most important being not able to afford housing or daycare, which are the most important for my kids and myself right now. They stay with my parent but are not urged to do homework or other essential activities. Likewise, we live with our parents therefore share a room. I have nowhere to study where I can focus. Financially, I've caught myself choosing between buying books and buying the essentials for my children. I need reasonable childcare services. food, gas and tuition money are some of the things I need for next quarter. If I had housing close to school that was affordable and reasonable priced childcare, I wouldn't have to stay with parents. (November, 2017)

Every quarter is a struggle around paying for tuition. Further, while I have most of my bills accounted for, we always have just short of two weeks of food each month, so it is extremely stressful those weeks getting adequate groceries for the family. Childcare only lasts 6:30am-6:30pm so I could NOT complete the requirements of the program if my boyfriend from my hometown does not come up to care for my child when clinicals last prior to and beyond those hours. I think this situation should be considered, and a short time period of leniency granted for the mother to drop off her children at daycare at the earliest time and pick up at the latest time. There have been times that the school of nursing has been less than understanding if my child was sick, or there is an emergency that I had to tend to. It's also important to note that these occurrences are extremely rare, and I hardly, if ever, have missed a class or clinical during 2.5 years at LWUSN. The single mother requires more than financial support to remain resilient in a difficult task, including having the emotional support of those around her including neighbors, friends, and classmates, faculty and administration, especially for one who has moved away from her support system to attend school. Another need that I have had as a single mother is being able to have my child involved in and understanding of my schooling, as well as spending quality time with him. There are and have been professors and administrators who developed a relationship with me and my child, and who ask about his well being, or to see what he was up to that week, which makes me feel cared for and appreciated in my role as a single mother. Further, every Christmas, the school has provided a personalized gift to each of the children of nursing students, which makes myself and my son feel very included and special. Another year, on Mother's Day, the cohort made a video to highlight the mothers among us, which included individual statements from classmates and faculty. Other events at the school campus were family friendly and very kind to the children. (November, 2017)

Food, gas, tuition stress for next quarter, not knowing if I'm going to be able to afford next quarter. (November, 2017)

Money has been a real issue because of the commute. I wouldn't be able to move near LWU because child care is very expensive as well as rent. I asked to see how much rent was in the apartments that the school offers and the cheapest was \$750. I believe the school should be more understanding with single students who are mothers and lower that amount. I take advantage of online courses and do most of my work while my child is asleep or in school. I would rarely be able to spend time with her if I were going to classes in person and working full time. (November, 2017)

My biggest need is for flexible course scheduling, for classes to meet at times that don't conflict with day care drop off and pick up. Often my classes start or end when daycare hours don't exist, so I don't have anyone to watch my child. I would also like to take less than a full load of classes. If I could take less classes, I could draw the program out longer and work more, and have more time with my kids during their childhood, which will never come again. I am missing out on so much to go to school. I could also use tutoring at times and prices that work with my class schedule and my parenting responsibilities. (November, 2017)

Counseling, tutoring, housing, help with food, help with computer. (November, 2017)

Need for better hours to match with my child's daycare so pick up and drop off are possible at similar times. They close when I need to be in class. I need counseling, and housing help. I also need help with tutoring. (November 2017)

More affordable housing near school. day care with better hours that allow me to go to class. counseling for me and my kids without the limited amount we can get each year. Help with meals. (November, 2017)

I could use academic support services for my children, kid-friendly housing, and financial aid. (November 2017)

Respondents identified parenting support groups, tutoring, supportive teachers, flexible schedules, meal preparation, more effective and explicit single parent-tailored financial assistance, suitable housing/ institutional proximity, and

childcare as categories of discreet need. Additional responses encompassed both technical tools with which to complete schoolwork and class times that coordinate with childcare services in order to attend classes without daycare conflict. For student mothers, counseling or support services could take a variety of forms. Single parent student mothers articulated their institution could play a role in filling needs related to altered degree completion schedule out, professors who understand their challenges and were willing to work with them, when they had to be tardy or absent, and attendance rules which accommodate needs to parent sick children or take sick children to doctor's visits. Respondents indicated program flexibility could play a significant role in enhancing support needed by single parent student mothers in reaching their scholastic achievement goals. Most felt that additional flexibility was needed in structuring of programs to support the academic endeavors of single parent student mothers. Implications of these findings are that significant room for improvement exists in structuring of programs and courses of study for mothers with dependent children.

Parenting students listed need for childcare assistance, greater tuition benefits, and increased financial aid with streamlined application processes. Travel concerns and issues with location were also predominant themes for single parenting mothers who concurrently were registered as students in degree-conferring programs. The variety of needs expressed in the discursive narratives reveal need from multiple sources and pressure from diverse external



situational variables which can impact success at all levels of scholastic enterprise. Institutional response can play a significant role in better supporting and meeting the needs of its parenting enrollees and helping ensure they reach degree completion goals.

### Final Advice for Future Single Parent Students

The closing question of the survey allowed single parent student mothers to advise successive generations of single parent student mothers based on their experiences as higher education students. The remarks, observations, and advice for parenting single parent students who may be ready to embark on their educational journeys were indicative of stressors and challenges that present when a woman attempts to parent alone concurrent with pursuing a degree in higher education:

Be prepared to work hard. There won't be much down time for you, or you time. That will make it hard. But it can be done if you are really committed to getting this degree. (November, 2017)

Try your hardest even though it is sometimes overwhelming. It is best to try your best now then later regret it. If you get through school not only will you be proud of yourself but your child/children will be proud of having a parent who did it. (November, 2017)

Have a sense of humor and laugh when you can. Be able to prioritize your studies and your kids as best you can. Don't sweat the small stuff. Try to remember you are doing the best you can, and someday, this will all be worth the sacrifice. (November, 2017)

Take your time, don't carry more than you can. Take time to destress. Try to do your work when your children are at school or daycare to lessen time away from them. It is doable with support. Speak to your professors whenever possible. Some of them will be very understanding. And don't be afraid to speak up for your needs. (November, 2017)

I would advise future students to be sure this is what you really want before enrolling. The road will be long and the toll on your family and on your health enormous. (November, 2017)

My advice to future students that are single parents is do not give up. No matter the obstacle, you are worth the time and effort to make a better life for you and your children. Find someone who can help you with the obstacle. I found an amazing mentor who was once a single mother, and she has been a Godsend to me. She has given me the courage to do the things I have done, and to see that I have a future in front of me. She has been an Angel on my shoulder. (November, 2017)

Be strong! Believe in yourself and be your own advocate. Stand up for what you need and speak up to others around you, especially teachers, about what you need to succeed. Don't be afraid or embarrassed because you're a single mom. (November, 2017)

I would advise future single parent moms to look for after school help. Do not do the accelerated program. If there's an extended program, do that one to make your time more manageable and put less stress on yourself. Do work in the morning before your kids wake up. They want to spend time with you in the evening. BE sure you have a strong support system. Speak to your professors whenever possible. They can be understanding and helpful. (November, 2017)

For future single moms who will be students, make sure you have a support system and reliable childcare arrangements for non-school hours and holiday breaks. Make sure that you have someone reliable and trustworthy to watch your child while you study for more than half the day. Try your hardest even though it is sometimes overwhelming. If you get through school, not only will you be proud of yourself but your child/children will be proud of you having a parent who did it. (November, 2017)

Be sure and communicate to your professors right away, explain your situation, and try and find out as far in advance as possible what the assignments will be, when they are due, and let them know of any challenges you may anticipate. Some professors are helpful and sympathetic. Others don't care at all. Have a support system in place, if possible, because you will need it due to the enormous amount of stress it is to juggle four roles. (November, 2017)

My advice to future moms who attempt school is you are going to need help with your children because you are at school all the time and there is

a lot of studying to be done outside of school, which you cannot do at home with young children. I could not get through school without the help of my Mother babysitting which allows me to study. Also, when you have to be at the hospital at 6:30 for clinical and you live an hour away, it's almost impossible to find a daycare center that opens earlier than 7, so I have to take my children to my mom at 5:30 and she would take them to daycare for me and then go to work herself; otherwise, I honestly do not know how I could do it. (November, 2017)

Reach out to people and don't be embarrassed to ask for help when you need it. (November, 2017)

I think that current/future students with children should be prepared to examine their lives closely and determine their priorities before starting the rigor of nursing school. Some things will simply not be possible with the added burden of parenting coupled with school success. Being prepared in a realistic way for the sacrifices that will be needed to successfully complete school will make coping with the competing demands a little easier. It is unrealistic to think that school will not require this, especially as a single parent. However, as a word of encouragement, my son in his very formative years watched me make these sacrifices and graduate Magna Cum Laude with my BSN. He himself has told me that this experience contributed greatly to his own motivation for success. He is now a sophomore studying computer engineering at UCR maintaining at 3.5 gpa. It IS possible. Flexibility within the program however, would make it just a little easier. Also, find a support system among others with a similar situation.

Make a schedule and stick to it. Finding time is hard but doable. Don't ever, ever give up. Be confident in yourself and your abilities. Use people's doubts as fuel to your motivation and deception to your practice and your children. On days that you feel like falling apart, fall apart, take a mental health day, and confide in a trusted person. But the next day when the sun comes up, get up and get back to it. Seek those special people who have caring, selfless hearts, and who will love you and your children unconditionally. When the goal seems far off, once it's done, it'll see like a blink of an eye, and you will be a different person, a better person, and your children will thank you the rest of their lives for that. (November, 2017)

I think it would be helpful to have a lot of family support around you. It will be very stressful and require a lot of sacrifice to succeed. Make a long term plan and stick to it. Use your time carefully and efficiently and try to not get burned out. (November, 2017)

Make a lot of time to put towards school if you want to be successful. Have family support, and set up the best childcare you can afford. Don't let others put you down or let your situation get in your way. Find a way to get through it and ask, "Why am I doing this?" and then remember that when times get hard. (November, 2017)

It depends on the program, but I feel our program is supportive if you need to miss a class. Teachers often let me turn in my assignments late without docking me points. I did, however, communicate and would ask for extensions on timelines for projects and that alone was a huge help. Have open communication with professors. (November, 2017)

I would advise them to be strong. Make a long-term plan and stick to it. Your kids deserve the better you you are becoming. (November, 2017)

One consistent theme which emerged in the data is the need for an effective and functional support system. One of the respondents talked about needing support systems, having a mentor or having a way to connect with other students in a similar situation. This emotional and connection need is distinct from what an advisor or counselor can satisfy. This is the need to connect with people who are living the experience and with whom the single parents can identify. For an institution to set up this type of support group does not seem inordinately expensive and can make an important difference in this population. There are a number of needs that these students have that would

require heavy financial commitments but this is one that a university could easily set up without great cost.

Additionally, a theme of self-advocacy emerged, with students readily recognizing the importance of speaking up and speaking out, regarding their unique needs as single parent students. The respondent urged students to contact professors early, and to share need for extra assistance or flexible class times and attendance policies. Some expressed strategies for gaining understanding and support from professors and peers. This is a self-advocacy role: communicating early to teachers and peers regarding a single parent special needs. Others echoed the theme of self-advocacy as crucial to their success in parenting concurrent with their studies. Finally, time management and perseverance seemed crucial of support tools in survival strategies devised by parenting single mothers.

While some single parent student mothers met with success in finding teachers who were willing to work with their schedules, constraints, and needs, others were limited in their abilities to engage alternative survival strategies for staying in school and maintaining socially situated identities as good parents and successful students. Respondents emphasized time management, and maintenance of a steady but persistent pace toward academic success. All respondents emphasized how important time with families was to them as individuals and which would enable them to maintain socially situated identities

as both parents and students. However, concerns regarding the feasibility of their multiple roles continued to emerge in data findings.

### Summary

This chapter presented the results and findings from final research instrument. Included were demographic information, participants' narratives, and themes relevant to study goals. Twenty six participants responded to requests for participation in the single parent student survey. Twenty six met the criteria for inclusion. Eight themes emerged from the survey results: categories of need, forms of advising which would advance single parent student mothers to degree completion, forms of support received and additional forms of support desired, perceptions and attributions of academic success, perspectives on advice to future single parent students, support systems, and self-advocacy. Excerpts from the mothers' discursive narratives were used to explain their lived educational experiences. Discourse analysis and linguistic analysis were applied in analyzing quoted statements to explain identified themes and to allow a deeper understanding of experiences and needs as single parent student mothers. Discourse analysis revealed conflict between everyday social and dialogic interactions, and student mothers' orientations toward a trajectory through achievement spaces, as inhibited or supported through institutional normative behaviors and expectations as relayed through professors' worlds of information, knowledge, argumentation, and achievements. Variation in cognitive

statements, affective statements, state and action statements, and ability and constraint statements were instrumental in relaying the building of socially situated identities between competing worlds.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has explored the lived educational experiences of parenting students enrolled in a variety of degree-conferring programs at a higher education institution. The study has attempted to include in these accounts study participants' own words, accenting their perceptions, roles, and views of themselves as parenting students functioning within the realm of higher educational culture. The experiences of the respondents was captured through the use of a survey, in which participants detailed their experiences in classrooms and across campuses while enrolled in degree programs. Additionally, their demographic information was correlated to key findings in the study, highlighting areas of need, and support deficits which participants viewed as relevant to their successes in their degree programs.

The Research Questions outlined in Chapter One were:

1. What needs are identified by single parent students in degree completion programs?
2. In what ways do student parents think advisors, teachers, administrators might reposition resources to better serve their needs?

This chapter provides a summary of the findings which were presented in the survey responses and discusses the findings in relationship to the literature and answers to the survey questions. Additionally, limitations of the study are



acknowledged, and recommendations are made for areas of potential future research, limitations of the study.

### Summary of Findings

The themes that emerged from the research study were as follows:

- 1) Participants' awareness of constrained and competing time demands was identified.
- 2) Competing pressures to produce the identities of "good mom" and "good student" were highlighted.
- 3) Guilt arising from missed event choices was articulated.
- 4) Guilt over lower classroom performance and loss of class standing over missed choice events was acknowledged.
- 5) Participants' views regarding presence or absence of institutional support tailored to their specific needs as single parent student mothers was described.
- 6) Participants' concerns regarding student debt were voiced.
- 7) Categories of unmet need were identified.
- 8) Support services that would assist single mothers to degree completion were specified.
- 9) Importance of Support Systems for parenting while students was identified.
- 10) Self-advocacy roles were urged for parenting single students.

Parenting student mothers in this study were aware of time constraints and multiple competing demands for resources already limited by absent partners: insufficient financial, physical, and emotional support to meet the challenges of raising dependent children to adulthood. Recognition of potential drawbacks and limitations which could affect familial, social, and educational outcomes for dependents from forced choices were articulated by the parenting students.

Student parents' discursive narratives indicated internal and external pressure to be better parents and better students. On some occasions, pressure to choose between attendance at school and family events and being present at moments which would ensure optimal outcomes in both categories of competing identities were identified. Institutional pressure and personal and instructional expectation—both implicitly and explicitly expressed, caused conflict between identities and roles, and a shifting into and out of roles and identities which made it difficult for student parents to maximize performance in any central area of personal or professional achievement.

Guilt was articulated from the consequences of having to miss key moments in children's school or extracurricular experiences. Additionally, student mothers' discourses indicated they perceived others' perceptions of their in-class performance and class standing suffered when a forced choice situation

resulted in their absence from class, or inability to participate in a group class activity, or arriving at class tardy.

Student mother narratives revealed resentment regarding being exhorted to choose between being a parent and being a student, when, in their opinions, they were forced to undertake both roles concurrently, without sufficient support to engage in either role. A second issue arose during discourse analysis indicating need for institutional leadership intervention to address faculty culture that is either insensitive or uninformed about the needs and life worlds of student mothers without partners.

A key deficit identified in the narratives of student mothers was the perceived absence of institutional support, which would have enabled them to achieve their educational goals and better provide for their families. Most indicated they had not received counseling tailored to their unique needs, nor had they received instruction or had their attention drawn to resources which would be of specific interest to them as parenting students. None of the respondents indicated they felt they had been the recipients of institutional support when queried.

Student parent narratives indicated struggles with the looming prospect of student debt and the larger societal implications of this issue. Institutions of higher education could better serve parenting students by creating advisory coalitions to work with state and federal governments as well as lending institutions to address the issue of single parent student financial support and

debt reduction. Discourse revealed internal struggle with choices between advancing educationally and incurring heavy debt loads, and remaining at lower levels of education and pay, but living with less debt. One participant discursive narrative resulted in dire predictions about the future, based on forced choice consequences of assuming an inappropriate or disproportionate load of debt based on earnings expectations.

When queried regarding categories of need, respondents' discourse articulated several important areas of unmet need: childcare, flexible schedules, instructional support that conveyed understanding of additional absence and tardy requirements, potentially longer program structure, additional financial funding that does not result in increased or disproportionate debt load following graduation, counseling without caps and at times and prices appropriate for single parent students, and advising which matched student mothers with available institutional resources.

### Discussion of Significant Findings

As student parent single mothers, it is a reasonable assumption that students' own voices can best tell their perspectives, anecdotes, and needs as parenting students. The student mothers who elected to participate in this study, told of their classroom and home experiences, detailed their unmet needs as single parent students, and articulated advice they felt would best benefit other single parent student mothers in their own words. The aim of this dissertation

was to explore and describe the needs, support services that would be most relevant in supporting the degree-seeking endeavors of parenting single mother students, and areas of institutional or instructional deficit which could be improved to advance the chances of single mothers procuring degrees in institutions of higher education. The survey administered a series of fifteen questions, which helped categorize the needs and experiences of the mothers into discreet themes that emerged in the discourses of the participants.

### Dominant Structuring Discourses

This study contradicts dominant structuring and institutional/cultural discourse that position single parent student mothers as less successful academic models of student success. Twenty percent of undergraduate women are estimated to be single mothers (Chant, 2006; Cuklanz & McIntosh, 2015). Further, results of this study support the view in the literature on feminine poverty that these adults negotiate multiple contexts in their daily lives (Freeman, 2015; Polakow, 1993) and are affected by broad patterns of disparity in both support and opportunity. The study found participants were both willing, determined, and creative in participating and engineering their own academic successes.

Additionally, study findings represented that single parent student mothers retain resilience in meeting the competing time demands and challenges of parenting without partners, while engaging in rigorous programs of study in

higher education. In the participants' words can be found the resilience that comes from learning to pursue success on their own terms.

As well, respondents indicated willingness to make the necessary forced-choice sacrifices to compete academically in degree-conferring programs, albeit with limited and varying degrees of success.

The literature argues that single parent students are a special population who require different avenues of advisement than traditional students (Tehand, 2007). Identified deficits in institutional support structures and personal resourcing were articulated by single parent mothers in the study. The findings for this study indicated that participant mothers did not feel adequately supported in their pursuit of degrees. Results indicated a strong need for counseling services, at times and frequency that would be compatible with parenting students' schedules and needs. Need presented in the form of greater financial assistance, improved childcare access, help with bedtime routines, baths, and homework, meals, flexibility in course scheduling and course offerings, flexibility in class attendance, and counseling services to help student mothers cope with the rigors of parenting and studying. While these areas of need were articulated, further research is needed to quantify how representative each of these needs would be in supporting single parent student mothers to degree completion. In spite of deficits in both support and advising, study respondents remained committed to achieving professional success for themselves as well as to ensuring better futures and scholastic outcomes for their dependents.

The challenges of exiting feminine poverty (Books, 2004; Freeman, 2015; Polakow, 1993), and being “multiply disadvantaged” lone mothers (Lipman et al., 2010), seeking degrees in higher education are many for student parent mothers. Study participants engaged creative need-meeting in order to not have to give up their goals of degrees in higher education. Study participants recognized that their success was crucial to family economic security (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 200; Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2013). Though absent partners and support, the single parent student mothers in this study were willing to make sacrifices, even some that resulted in guilt and anxiety for both themselves and their dependents in order for their offspring to enjoy more positive educational and social outcomes (Sabates et al., 2011) as a result of their sacrifices and studies.

Inherent in student mother discourses were areas of need that were both broad and specific. Institutional awareness appears lacking and sensitivity to the plight of single parent student mothers and the stresses they face in their coursework and parenting could offer potential for program expansion and policy change that would better support single parent student mothers in degree-seeking endeavors.

While “welfare queens” is a term used in the United States (Books, 2004) to describe people who manipulate the welfare system and collect excessive welfare benefits, the women who participated in this study exemplify committed concerned parents, juggling multiple time demands and competing

responsibilities to better their financial and professional prospects as well as improving school learning outcomes for their dependents. Politicians who exploit the term “welfare queens” for policy backing purposes, speak of “incentives” but typically only in terms of negative ones: “If you don’t.....then.....,” failing to predicate policy on a logic of inclusion and outcomes. Single parent students in this study were neither indolent, nor living off the largess of taxpayers in a system where there is relatively little oversight and potential exists for abuse.

Institutional change may require prefacing of political change regarding the language and logic through which single mothers are bound and a deepening of our understanding of the narratives and reality surrounding welfare. A change in “welfare thinking,” logic, and incentives may be necessary for single mothers to throw off the constraints of feminine poverty. Findings in this study underscore the importance of educators, higher education administrators, and future educators to undertake the intellectual and emotional work of learning more about the social causes, as well as the sometimes life-altering consequences of the poverty in which women and children find themselves entrenched. Although such efforts will not eradicate poverty, they can help form more insightful educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers (Books, 2004). Qualitative data taken from the narratives of women participants in this study reveals women of profound courage and quiet perseverance, systematically shattering misconceptions and stereotypes about others like them.



Though dominant institutional and religious culture deems single motherhood as a sign of moral decay, a societal shortcoming, and as a drain on social welfare resources, these women are carving alternative identities, ones as successful students, developing professionals, and budding contributors to collective communal knowledge. The wisdom of their experience was shared in the final survey question responses, and their commitment to bettering their lives and the lives of those who follow in their footsteps through a journey of shared experience as single mothers is clear.

### Recommendations

Single mothers are the fastest growing student demographic in the United States (The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, *Report to Congress*, 2012; Freeman, 2015; Threlfall, 2015). The strain and insufficiency of resources for parenting student mothers can be enormous and negatively impacts outcomes at all levels of scholastic enterprise.

Academic theorists advocate a broader, more globally-based higher education system that is focused on student, community, state, and national sectors of development and sustainability. The call, as Levin and Kater (2013) proposed, is for the next generation of educators and scholars to draw more deeply on historical purpose and value, while simultaneously informing practitioners and policy makers about actual behaviors and conditions of colleges and their students, and to assess the effects of diverse college attendance on

developing the workforce and individual students, while considering new avenues for financing, managing, and governing colleges, ushering in a new era of viability and change.

Educators who engage successfully in classrooms and across campuses with the rapidly growing sector of single parent student mothers, practice deliberate collaboration and recognition of the constraints under which single parent student mothers enter higher education degree-conferring programs. Policy that is both developed and articulated, with realistic objectives and mission/vision statements, have the potential to serve the largest and most under-represented segment of the populace historically underserved by flagships and elite universities (Levin & Kater, 2013). For example, universities and colleges can offer affordable, flexible, quality childcare to single parent student mothers, at times and with services that are consistent with the unique childcare situations of student parents with dependents, absent partners. Additionally, institutional advisors and financial services coordinators can help student parents navigate the complex forms needed to obtain appropriate support, and can direct them to financial resources which best meet their needs to support their families concurrent with pursuit of a degree. Moreover, faculty can communicate alternate scheduling options and course absence/tardy policies that are customized for single parent student mothers. Furthermore, faculty can assist in devising study groups that allow single parent student mothers to engage with other adults students, some parenting and some with or without partners, so that

they can study in ways that are more efficient and more effective than may be needed by traditional 18-22 populaces. Finally, universities can make available affordable meal plan and preparation services for working parent students, who may have to miss out on preparing appropriate nutritious meals for families due to work or labs which run late or early.

### Institutional Support Recommendations

Institutional measures which can best improve educational outcomes for the populace of single parent student mothers may include the following: childcare support services at prices and times which accommodate single parent students; counseling with unlimited visits and prices reduced or free for parenting students; meal preparation services which can be accessed readily and affordably; advising consistent with unique needs of parenting students; program structure and flexibility to accommodate work and study concurrent with parenting; and, financial support which reduces or eliminates post graduation debt load.

Multiple themes emerged from the data regarding categories of need. For example, development of effective support systems was a particular theme which emerged in data findings for this population. Discourse of one of the respondents articulated a need for support systems, having a mentor or having a way to connect with other students in a similar situation. One respondent said that having a “single parent network” (March, 2016) would be beneficial for her on her

journey to earning a college degree. I see this emotional and connection need as distinct from what an advisor or counselor can satisfy. This is the need to connect with people who are living the experience and with whom the single parents can identify. For an institution to set up this type of support group does not seem to be very expensive and can make an important difference in this population. There are a number of needs that these students have that would require heavy financial commitments but this is one that a university could easily set up without great cost.

Another parenting student mother indicated that housing close to campus would be helpful to her. Another respondent indicated that financial aid that did not include raising debt load would better allow her to pursue her dream of a college degree. The discourse of student mothers correlated the need for support groups in order to connect single mothers with others who share their challenges as both students and parents. Others felt that flexibility to work from home would support them to degree completion. Some mothers desired flexible school schedules to help them reach their academic goals. The variety of needs expressed by single mothers while pursuing degrees at higher education institutions indicates areas where institutional response can be greatly improved in reaching the underserved populace of parenting students.

One of the possibilities of implementing limited change that benefits single parent student mothers lies in effective leadership—and willingness to take risks (Schneider & Deane, 2015). Schneider and Deane observed that an iterative

approach may drive greater success than waiting for “evidence-based research to support modified practice” (p. 222). For colleges, questions of viability, role, teachings, capitalist agenda, Marxist agenda, accountability, governance, institution-driven mission, and practice continue to eddy (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Institutional needs are as real as social, individual, and communal ones, and in no utopia will education function in a void. In fact, Cohen and Brawer advocate reform via adaptation of existing structures to meet emerging needs of non-traditional students and other connections between program and community, many of which could potentially benefit single parent student mothers pursuing career-building measures. Survivorship of higher education, as outlined in the California Master Plan (“What is CMPHE,” 2010), must address the needs of the precariat populace of single parent student mothers, including single parents and other marginalized groups. The relation-supportive professional orientation (Levin & Kater, 2013, p. 237) may draw in parenting students to the academic community but inability to survive or support families may drive out parenting students, which limits their ability to engage identity transformation.

Fewer tools for advancement and success are available to single parent student mothers, resulting in increasingly precarious positioning both academically and socially for marginalized groups and vulnerable populaces, such as single mothers. This identified gap opens up possibilities for institutions wishing to address deficits in support services for the fastest-growing student demographic (Jones-DeWeever, & Gault, 2008).

Institutional functioning continues to undergo rigorous change, nudged by factors such as fragmentation of faculty labor force, ethnic diversity of student populace, hybridization of instruction, welfare-to-work programs, and others, which contribute to the eddying of evolutionary leadership and change (Hale, 2004; Levin & Kater, 2013). Hale (2004) cited social service recipients in higher education as viewing their higher educational endeavors as both “instrumental and transformational” (p. 764), noting welfare reform is needed if avenues of escaping poverty are to lie within the grasp of single parent mothers who are higher education students.

According to Cohen and Brawer (2008), increasingly complex patterns of disbursement have also served to confound negotiated budget, unit rate formulas, minimum foundation, and cost-based program funding. But a narrowing of the public view of colleges as occupational training centers could signify a commensurate change in patterns of support. While single mother students face issues of access and equity in pursuing higher educational goals, funding, focus, and evolution in mission and vision of college institutions continue to evolve in ways that could better meet needs of the underserved and underprepared groups of college students. As noted by Cohen and Brawer (2008), students’ abilities should exert the single most “powerful influence” (p. 297) on the level, quality, type, and standard of curriculum and instruction offered in every program in every school. Remediated students—many of whom are single parent students--fit within the mission of connecting people with

opportunity. Whether willingly or unwittingly, colleges will be involved with assessing, evaluating, and facilitating functional literacy for single parent students (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Cohen and Brawer noted that the future of higher education rests almost entirely on the ways in which it structures response to an increasingly diverse student populace, and articulates goals of educating and empowering them. Sustainability of resources, funding, and restructuring of program composition continues to factor into challenges linking community, basic, and vocational education successfully (Cohen & Brawer, 2013).

Stakeholders, demands for accountability and state level policies that allocate funding and initiatives making affordable education available to single parent students factor into single parent student success in higher educational endeavors (Schneider & Deane, 2015). Increased access and diverse enrollment can affect individual social mobility but further impacts school outcomes for children of single mother students as well.

### Implications of Findings

Cassuto (2015) advised higher education to “reforge its public ties” (p. 229) and advocated both students and faculty alike work to keep the enterprise viable. He also urged a remaking of a symbiotic and mutually supportive relationship between students, their communities, and universities. Self-actualization must not be limited to a select few. Strategies incorporating modified vision and mission statements reflective of educational trends in student

populaces and institutional objectives can contribute to enabling single mothers to relinquish the grasp feminized poverty has held on their upward mobility. Goals for transforming the way in which higher education is distributed should remove traditional gatekeepers, the wealth holders, from barring higher education to those below poverty lines, in particular in this instance, women who parent dependent children alone. Resource structures and course offerings must become more efficient at targeting identified deficits and developing programs consistent with both mission and student need.

The differential or “hidden” reality of single parenthood impacts social welfare in significant and far-reaching ways, and matriculation and/or attrition of this section of the precariat (Standing, 2014), contributes to either the demise or foundation of collective formulations of society. Success for and inclusion of this group may potentially transform opportunities that ensure rightful participation in collective social enterprise for generations to come, thus reducing or eliminating precarity and the feminization of poverty. School culture, and access to shared enterprise via the human capital of education, is the avenue by which social identity may change in assisting in reformulation of broader social identity, impacting school outcomes in dependent children.

#### Limitations and Threats to Validity

First, a potential drawback to the study is that all participants were from one county in Southern California. Limitations of this study are that it focused on



one geographical institution and one state. This may result in skews in data collection that presents in the form of experiences that may be unique to a certain populace. Additionally, results cannot readily be extrapolated and thus the study presents with limited generalizability as the study was not conducted on a variety of publicly-funded higher education institutions.

Further limitations of this study are that the institutional setting is unique. The particular institutional culture in which participants engaged in higher education degree-seeking endeavors may influence results via dominant institutional discourse, which could influence both perception and outcomes. Potential drawbacks of this study include findings that external and internal barriers to pursuit of college degrees may misrepresent or skew data results. Furthermore, participants in the study were all female, omitting a not insignificant demographic in the form of single student fathers, who, though admittedly a much smaller group, and lacking the inherent hiring and matriculation bias which female parenting students face, deserve recognition and support nonetheless.

The most significant drawback of this study is that it lacked follow-up in the form of interviews or focus groups to provide in-depth support of findings. Following data collection by asking respondents to self-select for further study in the form of consenting to participate in small groups or in-depth personal interviews could strengthen validity of findings as well as provide further clarification and additional information regarding key areas of focus.

Finally, the most significant threat to the validity of the study is that the

group under study exhibited and self-selected into a group, absent a comparison group, that is inherently resilient, meaning, they have already demonstrated ability in overcoming obstacles to matriculation, successfully engaging in multiple parenting, employment, and studenting roles, and have found ways to advance despite financial and institutional or instructional support deficits. It is of crucial importance that the group of mothers who gave up before applying, quit after encountering enrollment bias in the applications process, withdrew in the absence of institutional support, or attrite when family support insufficiency became too pressing, are acknowledged and attention drawn to their plight. These are the ones for whom findings of this study are of greatest significance. Therefore, the researcher acknowledges bias inherent in getting respondents who are most successful and resilient to personal or institutional deficits, among potential parenting student mothers.

### Recommendations for Future Studies

First, future studies could benefit from additional qualitative items and the study design should encompass a quasi-experimental design. Additionally, the study could be strengthened by inclusion of single parent student mothers who drop out of degree-conferring programs. Finally, the study could conduct in-depth qualitative information-seeking in the form of focus groups or personal interviews to determine the types of services and support which could augment financial solidarity for parenting student mothers.

## Conclusion

This study can lead to transformation within institutional and instructional response to parenting single mothers and can advance discourse in educational arenas about the importance and value of supporting parenting students to degree completion. Study findings underscore the importance of teachers recognizing parenting students and their unique needs in meaningful ways and using the process of education to truly effect change in the achievement spaces of single parent students' lives.

Intentional acts by both institutional leaders and instructors, using the foundation of higher education, can support learning and opportunities for parenting student mothers which will shift these students from being invisible to being reframed as central to institutional mission and vision success.

## Closing

Ironically, turn of the century challenges appear remarkably similar in driving educational change, both for the turn of the twentieth as well as twenty-first century. Much remains unchanged; yet much has changed. However, colleges still exist to serve students and their communities. Learning, teaching, and educating will continue forward, with some steps backward, yet progress is inevitable and institutional change must address the underserved and underprepared, especially single parent student mothers, for social advancement

to occur on a global scale.

APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)**  
**CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO**  
**Human Subjects Protocol Change/Modification/Amendment Form**

DATE: 11/13/17

IRB NUMBER:  
15067

EMAIL ADDRESS(S): gviskocil@llu.edu

REVIEW CATEGORY:

EXEMPT ☒ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL BOARD ☐

Note: All changes to your originally approved protocol, *no matter how minor*, require IRB approval before implementation.

INVESTIGATOR(S) / RESEARCHER(S) NAMES: Gina Vyskocil

DEPARTMENT: Education

PROJECT TITLE: Single Mothers in Higher Education

Please return this fully completed form to the IRB Research Compliance Officer/AAS, Mr. Michael Gillespie, in the Office of Academic Research. Attach additional sheets if necessary to describe in detail any changes to the original approved protocol or methodology related to your research or the human subjects thereof.

Survey has minor changes to survey questions. Please see attached.

Have there been any adverse events or unanticipated problem(s) that relate to the research conducted and/or human subjects utilized in your research, since your protocol was originally approved? You are required to fill out the (AE) adverse event report if an adverse event occurred during the conduct of your research (see IRB website). Fill that form out and turn it in with this protocol change form.

Yes ☐ No ☒

**Investigator(s) Assurance:**

The information and answers to the questions above is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge and I understand that prior IRB approval is required before initiating any changes that may affect the human subject participant(s) in the originally approved research protocol. I also understand that in accordance with federal regulations I am to report to the IRB or administrative designee any adverse events or unanticipated events that may arise during the course of this research.

Signature of Investigator(s)/Researcher(s)

11/13/17  
Date

Signature of Faculty Advisor for Student Researchers

11/14/2017  
Date

Signature of IRB Chair or IRB Chair Designee

11/17/17  
Date

Approval of protocol change/modification/amendment is granted from: 1/14 through 1/14



Academic Affairs  
Office of Academic Research • Institutional Review Board

May 26, 2016

Ms. Gina M. Vyskocil and Prof. John Winslade  
College of Education, Doctoral Studies  
California State University, San Bernardino  
5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, California 92407

**CSUSB**  
**INSTITUTIONAL**  
**REVIEW BOARD**  
Administrative Review  
IRB#15067  
Status  
**APPROVED**

Dear Ms. Vyskocil and Prof. Winslade:

Your application to use human subjects, titled, "Equity and Access for Single Parent Students in Higher Education: Understanding Unique Challenges of Single Parent Students" has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of California State University, San Bernardino has determined that your application meets the requirements for exemption from IRB review Federal requirements under 45 CFR 46. As the researcher under the exempt category you do not have to follow the requirements under 45 CFR 46 which requires annual renewal and documentation of written informed consent which are not required for the exempt category. However, exempt status still requires you to attain consent from participants before conducting your research.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required.

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

- **Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research prospectus/protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,**
- **If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research, and**
- **When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at [mgillesp@csusb.edu](mailto:mgillesp@csusb.edu). Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

*Judy Sylva*

Judy Sylva, Ph.D., Chair  
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

JS/MG

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5500 UNIVERSITY PARKWAY, SAN BERNARDINO, CA 92407-2393

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